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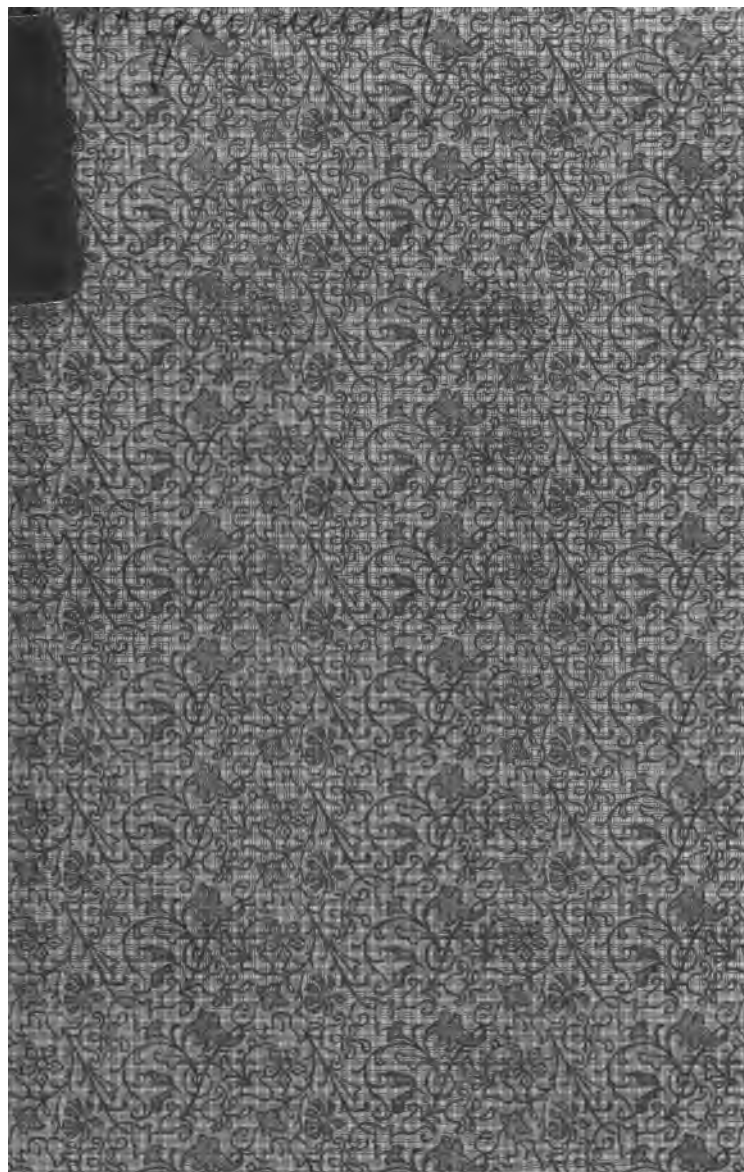
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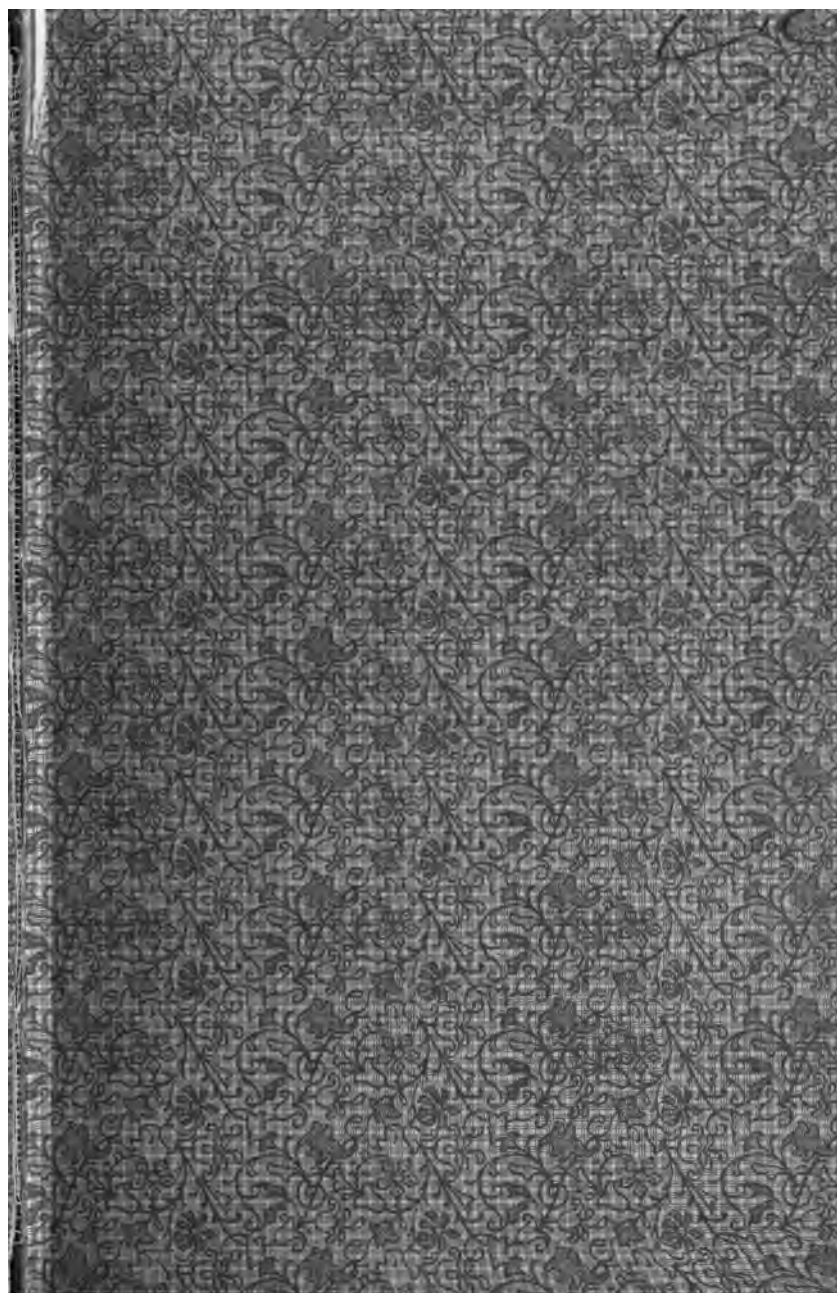
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# by THE RIVER



FLORENCE WARDEN







James  
AC



# The House by the River.

BY

**FLORENCE WARDEN,**

Author of "The House on the Marsh," "What Ought She to Do?"  
"The Heart of a Girl," "Joan, the Curate," Etc., Etc.

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# THE HOUSE BY THE RIVER

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## CHAPTER I.

**"PRAED STREET! Praed Street!"**

How tired she was of that monotonous chant, which greeted her ears morning after morning, and again evening after evening, as she started for the city, and made her way back again, day after day, with the click-click of the typewriter always in her ears.

For Alison Clevely was a typewriter girl, just one of the great crowd of surging young womanhood that pours into the city in the morning and out again in the evening, earning a scanty living in a monotonous and not very easy way, with, for the most part, a dark sky overhead, and not over-bright prospects of life to keep up its spirits upon.

Click-click! She had had nothing but that music ringing in her ears for six months; when, walking up and down that charming and salubrious promenade, the Praed Street railway platform, she met the eyes of one of those who were to be her fellow-travelers in the daily journey

citywards, and meeting them, she wanted to meet them again.

He was a typical young Englishman, and she guessed that his age might be about her own, which was three-and-twenty. Tall, not yet filled out to his full breadth of shoulder, very well dressed, undoubtedly well bred, he had, she thought, the best eyes she had ever seen. It was not that she had never seen handsomer eyes in a human head, but that there was in these straightforward gray eyes, with their thick, straight, black eyebrows and dark eyelashes, something that made her think she would not like to do a mean thing or say a harsh or discourteous word within sight and hearing of the possessor of those particular eyes.

On that first time of seeing him Alison Clevely scarcely noticed any feature but that one; two mornings later, however, he was on the platform again, and she stole a furtive look, and was interested to ascertain that her fellow-traveler's good looks were undeniable. His profile was distinguished, the chin round and firm, the nose very slightly aquiline, while a dark mustache, not yet very thick, just shaded a mouth with the common English defect of lips rather too full.

He met her eyes, and she felt herself reddening, and she wondered whether the interest she could not help feeling in the possessor of the fine face and honest gray eyes was too plainly perceptible in her own countenance.

She had not much time for idle thoughts, how-

ever, for the train came in; and while he got into a first-class compartment, with a group of other young men as well dressed as himself, she meekly trod on the toes of the clerks of both sexes who thronged the nearest second-class compartment, and saw nothing more of her fellow-traveler until she got out at the Mansion House. Then she noticed that, while she went up Cornhill, he crossed over to Threadneedle Street.

And he looked round at her just as she looked across at him.

For three or four months she saw him almost every day, and, absurd as she knew the amusement to be, she did amuse herself by wondering who he was, and by weaving little stories about him, very harmless stories, very absurd ones, making him now an only child, with a mother who adored him, and now the chief hope and pride of a large family of brothers and sisters.

Lest her fancies should seem too foolish, it must be mentioned that Alison Clevely was alone in the world, with few friends, and those few a long way off in distant Lancashire, and with a natural shyness and reserve which made it impossible for her to make friends worthy the name among the giddy, lively girls who were her daily companions.

Miss Prim was their name for her, and they laughed at and perhaps looked down upon her for not indulging in those half-minute flirtations which, in many cases, formed the transient joy of their luncheon hour. Alison had no flowers

or letters to show to envious acquaintances, as they had, and she was popularly supposed to have no ideas beyond so many words a minute.

And now she hugged her own little airy romance to her heart, and found a pleasure which surely was harmless enough in meeting the eyes of her interesting fellow-traveler, as she now almost always did once in the course of the morning, and in wondering whether he was grateful for her interest to the extent of feeling a corresponding interest in her.

And at last she felt sure that he did.

For one morning he got into the second-class compartment with her, and she, seeing more of his face than she had ever done before, was more than ever struck by what she noted in it.

This happened more than once, and Alison began to see that it was only a question of time for them to get acquainted. And thereupon a sort of terror seized her, and instead of meeting his eyes she tried to avoid doing so, and when he got into the same carriage she took care to glide out so quickly that it was impossible for him to help her out, as once or twice he had most unobtrusively done.

But she felt that she was only putting off something that she instinctively dreaded, and at last she knew that the moment had come.

Alison was sitting at her typewriter, busy with her work one morning, when she heard the voice she had instinctively been expecting to hear. Her fellow-traveler was asking for the services of a

young lady to take down letters for his father, Mr. Darke of Riverscourt, who was laid up with the gout and could not leave his house.

Alison did not look round. She knew his voice, and she knew, too, who it was that would be selected for this service; the manager made a different choice, but he was overruled.

"I think this young lady is the quickest worker," said Alison's gray-eyed fellow-traveler, standing beside her while she went on with her work. "Can she come?"

"Miss Clevely, will you go down to Riverscourt this afternoon?" said the manager.

She demurred, looking up with a scarlet face. Some vague dread possessed her, and at that moment she would have given a year of her life for power to refuse. But she had no reasonable excuse to make, and young Mr. Darke repeating the question courteously:

"Will you come?"

She just bowed her head in assent, and went on with her typing without knowing what she was doing.

As soon as the luncheon hour was come Alison put on her hat and, having been told what train to catch at Paddington, set out on her journey.

When she got to the station at which she had been told to get out she asked the way to Riverscourt of a casual boy.

"Lord Luckram's place?" said the boy. "Oh, yes; it's down by the river."

And he was proceeding to give further direc-

tions, when she interrupted him by saying that it was not Lord Luckram's but Mr. Darke's house that she wanted.

"Oh, it's the same," said the boy. "It belongs to Lord Luckram, who's got no money, and it's let to Mr. Darke, who's got lots."

This was charming, to get thus the whole history of the place and two families in a nutshell; and, smiling to herself, she followed the direction given and came in a few minutes to a sort of earthly paradise, a succession of beautiful gardens, exquisitely kept, and abounding at this spring season with flowering fruit trees and with delicate foliage of all kinds. Here and there, on a smooth lawn, a spiny araucaria or a straight-limbed cedar brought a darker tint into the scene. And when she came suddenly in view of a mansion, large, plain, stately, of red brick grown dark with time, she felt rather overwhelmed by her own insignificance, and began to wish she had not come.

A footman, who surveyed her with that exquisitely veiled contempt with which men-servants regard all such modest visitors, took in her name and her message, and left her to admire a very wide, paneled hall, with a fire burning under a hooded chimney-piece, and two magnificent oriel windows, with the panes filled by painted glass, and other evidences of magnificence and luxury to which she was wholly unaccustomed.

She heard a warwhoop, and then another,

without seeing the person who uttered it. But Alison had had brothers, and she knew, without further evidence, that there was a young family, and that the Easter holidays were on.

And while she still waited, a boy of about fourteen came in very dexterously through a doorway on his hands, with his feet curved over his head. On seeing a stranger, he brought himself into a more conventional position, reddened and stared at her.

"Are you the girl that's come to do father's typewriting?" he asked. And on her answering in the affirmative, he went on: "Well, I'm just jolly glad, for it'll give him something to do, and he'll leave us alone. When he's ill we can't do right."

"Not even by walking on your hands instead of your feet, and kicking the statues and flowers as you pass?" said she, smiling.

There was a twinkle in the boy's eyes as he answered, gravely: "Not even then!"

Alison felt that she liked that boy!

"Noel sent you, didn't he?" he asked, in a friendly tone.

"Noel! Oh, I don't know."

The boy nodded.

"Yes, I know it was Noel. Big chap, with a long nose; looks as if he ought to have the earth, and meant to get it!"

"He's your brother, I suppose?"

"Half-brother," corrected her new acquaintance, with a nod. "You see, it's rather compli-



cated, because father went and married three times. First he married and had one son, that's Swithin, and he's a beast. Then he married again and had another son, that's Noel, and he's a brick. And then he married a third time, and there's my sister Carrie and me."

"I see. I thought there wasn't much likeness between you and the gentleman I saw."

"Noel? No, I don't go in for beauty myself."

He certainly did not. With an indifferent nose, a wide mouth, light eyes, and a small, freckled face, the boy was not handsome by any means.

"Athletics?" she suggested, smiling.

"A little of that," replied he. "Not too much, you know; too much cricket and football reduces you to the level of a brute. I've noticed its effects on the other chaps at Eton."

"You're home for the holidays, I suppose?"

He nodded. They were chatting very comfortably on the hearth-rug, with each a foot on the stone fender and a hand on the overhanging hood above.

"I suppose they're nearly over now?" Alison went on.

He gave her a shrewd look.

"No, they aren't," he said, promptly. "Not in my case, at least. I don't know whether I shall have the mumps, a severe contagious disease which I should not think of carrying back to school, and the infection of which lasts a long time, or general debility from overwork."

She laughed.

"You can't pretend to have the mumps," said she.

"Oh, yes, I think I can, enough for mother. The pain comes before the swelling in acute cases, or, if it doesn't generally, it might in a unique case. Mine will be a unique case."

"I think so," said she, drily.

"And, look here, don't you try to give me away because I've honored you with my confidence," he went on, with menace in his tone. "If you do, your life won't be worth living."

She smiled.

"I'm afraid it won't be in your power to do anything very dreadful to me. I'm only here for the afternoon, to write Mr. Darke's letters while he's away from business."

"Then, as he's always away from business, you'll be here always," said the boy, promptly. "And I'm glad of it, for I think we shall get on, you and I."

Alison had no time to inquire the reason of his good opinion, for at that moment the footman returned and conducted her by way of a long corridor to a charming room, with a view of the river and a beautiful sloping lawn; and here, in an invalid wheel-chair in one of the windows, she found her employer, Mr. Darke.

As he could not rise, one of his feet being raised on a large, square stool in front of him, she was unable to judge of his height very accurately; but she thought he must be tall; he had a fine, open

countenance, set off by thin hair of silvery whiteness, while thick eyebrows, still almost black, gave a particular dignity to his face and a look of strange power and impressiveness to his black eyes.

His greeting was graceful and charming. Holding out one hand, with a smile which showed his white and even teeth, he said :

"Miss Clevely, I'm very glad to see you. You'll excuse a poor cripple!" And he gave a whimsical glance at his feet and shook his head sorrowfully.

He had two typewriters, one on each side of a big office desk a few yards away from him. He himself sat at a smaller desk, with a roll-top, and when he got warm over the work of dictating his letters he would wheel himself up and down the room, which was long, and the middle of which had been kept clear for him, pausing now and then to look over her work, humming and ha-ing all the time in a way which would have been disconcerting to an operator of less experience than she was.

It was the usual dull sort of city man's correspondence, but, luckily for her, Alison had done so much of that sort of thing before that she was able to finish his sentences for him almost before he had stuttered them out, and to avoid those repetitions which are a puzzle to the inexperienced secretary.

With two hours' steady work they had got a great pile of letters written, and then Mr. Darke, deftly wheeling his chair round to face her, ex-

pressed his approval of her labors in glowing terms.

"Miss Clevely," said he, throwing back his head and letting her, as it were, sun herself in the glow of his dark eyes, "I don't want to speak disparagingly of your sex—indeed, a greater admirer of the ladies does not exist—but you are the very first lady who has ever come up to my ideal of what a secretary ought to be. I have had a dozen since I have been tied by the leg down here, and never before have I found one with intelligence enough to be a help instead of a hindrance."

Alison was delighted, not only by the praise, which, indeed, she had determined to earn, but by the gracious courtliness with which it was given.

Mr. Darke spoke deliberately, with a measured intonation which gave additional weight to what he said, and the satisfaction he felt shone in his face and doubled the natural graciousness of his manner.

She felt as if she were in the presence of a prince.

"You'll be able to come down again to-morrow, I hope?" he said, earnestly; "or we could put you up if you could stay. I hope you can stay?"

She told him that was impossible, that she must be back at the office on the following morning; and thereupon he at once dictated another letter asking that she might be sent again to Riverscourt on the following day.

"And now," said he, "you must have some tea,

and my daughter Carrie will show you round the grounds and find you some flowers between now and dinner-time. Oh, yes," he went on, as she protested, "you must stay to dinner."

Alison afterward found out that this was quite characteristic of Mr. Darke; nothing was good enough for anybody who pleased him, while, on the other hand, if one were unlucky enough not to satisfy him, boiling oil and brimstone were punishments too mild.

He wheeled himself nimbly to the bell on the right side of the fireplace, and, having touched that, he went round to the left side and touched another. In answer to the first summons a footman appeared, whom he directed to show Miss Clevely the way to the drawing-room; and in answer to the second bell his valet came, on whose arm he leaned to rise from his chair. Alison just caught sight of this movement as she hurried out of the room, thinking that Mr. Darke must be sensitive on the subject of his dependence upon other limbs than his own.

She was led through the corridor and hall to the first of a beautiful suite of drawing-rooms, which seemed to her almost too stately for everyday use, and in the last and smallest of these she found her friend, the boy, crawling about the room with two small, brown Pomeranians on his back, a handsome, fair girl, who looked about fifteen, but who was really older, and to whom the epithet "bouncing" applied, and Mrs. Darke.

At first sight one was able to surmise that her

husband had married her before he had "got on." She was beautifully dressed in embroidered Indian muslin, with a black velvet and some handsome pearls round her throat. She was tall, buxom, good-natured and dictatorial. She had a handsome face, a double chin, an artificially pink complexion, scarlet lips and bronze hair.

"Here she is!" sang out the boy. "Hurray!"

And he overturned the two small dogs into his mother's lap and offered the visitor a chair with effusive politeness, which made his mother and sister laugh while they scolded him.

"You mustn't shout at a lady in that boisterous fashion," said Mrs. Darke, holding out her hand with a merry and good-humored smile. "Peverell is spoilt, Miss Clevely, as no doubt you've found out already, since he tells us he has introduced himself."

Peverell was unabashed.

"Yes, I did introduce myself, and I flatter myself I made a most favorable impression," he said, planting himself upon the hearth-rug in an attitude Alison could tell had been one of his father's. "Now, tell us, what did you think of father?"

Of course they all laughed at this impudent speech, and before they had recovered from it Mr. Darke himself came in, leaning on the arm of his valet, and walking in a peculiar manner which Alison knew at once to be not the effect of gout, but of some different malady. He seemed not to be sure where or on what he was treading, and he

lifted each foot as if he were walking through long grass, and brought it down with a stamp before lifting the other one.

They all looked at him eagerly, and he at once expressed his delight at Miss Clevely's work with an enthusiasm which made her blush.

Peverell was much amused, and, after looking at her slyly while she sipped her tea in a corner by the nearest window, he came up to her and said:

"By Jove! Miss Clevely, you must be a wonder! I thought pretty girls were never intelligent!"

Though she was angry with his impertinence, she could not resent it very keenly, as impertinence seemed to be expected in this monkey of fourteen, who, moreover, took a daring and infectious delight in his own unconventional speeches, and seemed to dare her to be angry with him.

The ladies cordially welcomed the suggestion that she should stay to dinner, and Carrie and her brother took her round the grounds to fill up the time.

Alison had never been in so beautiful a place. The soft lawns, with their patches of spring flowers, and the knots of trees and evergreens which diversified their smooth surface; the beautiful kitchen garden, with the fruit trees in blossom on broad bed and old red wall; the alleys leading to the river's edge, and the view up and down stream, without a boat in sight, and with young

birds fluttering over the sedge on each bank—all filled her with a sense of delightful ease and repose, so that she turned quickly to Miss Darke and said, impulsively:

“How happy you ought to be living here!”

Carrie laughed. She was a great, big, overgrown child of eighteen, who wore her hair down her back, tied simply with a ribbon, and who, it was plain to see, was just a refined edition of her mother at the same age.

“Well, I suppose we are!” she said. “I don’t think there’s anything I should care to change in my life, except, of course—Swithin.”

“Miss Clevely doesn’t know Swithin,” said Peverell. “When you do, you’ll hate him as much as we do.”

“I hope not,” Alison murmured, politely.

“Except for him, I wouldn’t have anything changed,” went on Carrie, “except poor papa’s locomotor ataxia, or whatever they call it.”

“Even that,” put in the boy, “is a misfortune which has its bright side. He used to be always chiveying me about. And I don’t think it’s for us to complain of the decrees of Providence.”

And while Carrie was scolding him for his wickedness, Alison felt her heart beating suddenly faster as Noel Darke came toward them from the house.

Perhaps he gave the two younger people an elder-brotherly intimation that he did not want their society. Certain it is that at the end of a few minutes, as they all went on walking round



the garden, Alison found that the two younger ones were some yards ahead, and that Noel Darke and she were practically *en tête-à-tête*.

"You like this place?"

"It's a paradise."

"For a long time I have meant to bring you here."

She said nothing to this. Indeed, she had hard work to retain her self-possession. She was afraid of this man, afraid of the power she knew he would be able to get over her if he wished. And, although it was the very nobility in his face which had first made her enshrine his image in her heart in a way of which she was ashamed, her admiration had become a sort of fear now that, once for all, the acquaintance which she had expected and feared had begun.

She roused herself to speak primly, and in a commonplace way:

"I was very glad to come. Mr. Darke was kind enough to say I was the best secretary he had had."

"Of course, I knew he'd say that. And now tell me, if I may know, how you come to be in the dingy city hammering all day at a typewriter?"

Alison felt suddenly that she would have liked to tell him some made-up story, to put him off with some excuse or some tale. For she was suddenly ashamed of the pitiful loneliness which put her on such a different plane from his own happy sister. But one glance from his steady eyes was

enough to force the truth from her, and she said, meekly and with hesitation :

"It's the usual story, I think. When a girl has to earn her own living, there are not many occupations for her to choose from."

"That's not exactly what I meant," said he, very gently. "I think yours is not quite the same story as that of the other girls in your office, for instance."

A sudden, bitter laugh broke from her lips. How different her story was from theirs nobody but herself knew. She drew a long breath and told him the truth quite simply :

"No, I am not a Londoner. My family is an old Lancashire one, and we've come down in the world. We lived in a big house, a nice house—not so big or so nice as yours—but we lived there many years, hundreds of years. We lived there so long that I suppose we got worn out—like the old house and the old furniture. And when my father died the family, as a family, just came to an end. One of my brothers went out to a relation in Jamaica and another to Canada, and, because I would not live with an old aunt in a little house at Lytham, I came to London and got lost in the crowd here!"

She hurried it out quickly, nervously, with her eyes on the ground. She was obliged to be frank with him, but it was difficult and strange to tell all this to a stranger. And yet she had to tell it, she had to obey.

He was too much interested to make any com-

monplace remark about it. He just pulled the buds off a lilac bush near him, and, listening quietly, made no comment except by a bend of the head.

And those few moments in which they stood silent on the gravel path between the yew hedge on the one side and the straggling bushes on the other, with the declining sun touching the tops of the fruit blossoms, and the voices of the two young ones sounding cheerfully in the distance, were the happiest moments Alison had ever known.

Then he spoke, and his words were startling enough.

"I think I knew all that," said he, suddenly.

The girl looked up, and the blood rushed to her face as she met his eyes.

"You knew it! How could you?" she cried.

"That's more than I can quite tell. But certainly if you'd asked me to guess, instead of telling me what you have done, I should not have been very far out."

"Won't you tell me how?"

He thought a moment.

"Well, though I've never spoken to you, I've seen a good deal of you, haven't I? Enough to know that you were not just like the crowd."

"Well?" said she, pleased in spite of herself.

"I could see you were not Miss Smith of Islington or Miss Brown of Peckham Rye."

"Well?"

"Then there is something in the type which

told me you did not belong to the south. I've been in Yorkshire and Lancashire, and something in the look of your eyes reminded me of the look of the faces I'd seen up there."

She was surprised, interested, delighted that he had noticed so much.

"And what else?" said she.

He hesitated.

"Well," he said, at last, "it was evident that if you, a girl like you, had to go to the city every day, your people were not as well off as they once were; while, finally, it was clear that if your parents had been alive, they would not have allowed so beautiful a girl as you to go about by herself."

Alison hung her head, and tears came to her eyes, while a delicious sensation of pleasure thrilled in all her veins. He remained silent for a moment, and then said, in a low voice:

"You're not offended by my plain speaking, I hope? You almost said I was to say just what I thought, you know."

"I'm not offended," said she.

And prudence made her prim, though her heart was dancing.

There was another moment of silence, and then a harsh laugh startled them both; and, glancing up quickly, they saw, looking at them through the yew hedge, a face which Alison guessed to be that of Swithin, the eldest son.

He was tall and thin, and his face was unduly small, freckled, and of that peculiar complexion

which goes with sandy hair and light, almost colorless eyes.

There was just enough likeness in his face, in spite of his ugliness, both to his father and to his half-brother, Peverell, for her to know that he was one of the family but she was pleased to see that he bore not even a family likeness to Noel Darke.

"What are you doing in the celery bed?" asked Noel, shortly.

Swithin drew back his head a little.

"Oh, nothing," said he, drily. "I thought I heard Lady Rosina's voice talking to you, that's all."

Noel's face changed, and Alison saw an expression of anger and dismay pass over it as he stepped back and looked again at his half-brother.

"Oh, don't look so savage!" went on Swithin. "I dare say your *fiancée* doesn't mind your flirting with other ladies. I'm awfully sorry if I cut short an agreeable *tête-à-tête*!"

And he disappeared with a crash among what Alison judged to be cucumber frames, while Noel Darke and she, hearing the sound of a gong from the house, hurried back, exchanging only perfunctory remarks, and trying to appear as if no unpleasant interruption had come upon them like a bolt from the blue.

As for Alison, it is impossible to describe the effect which the discovery of a moment before had had upon her. Although, face to face with

her everyday, sensible self, she would have laughed at the thought that she cherished anything stronger than a passing sentiment for this handsome, gentle-mannered Noel Darke, yet the suggestion that he was engaged to be married to another woman cut her like a knife. She felt that she was in a dream all through the somewhat lengthy dinner, which seemed to her a grand function, taking place as it did in a magnificent dining-hall, at a table radiant and splendid with flowers and shaded lights, sparkling glass and shining silver, but which appeared to be only their every-day meal.

Mrs. Darke was gorgeous in black velvet, old lace and diamonds; Carrie wore pale pink silk and flowers; while Alison, poor little Cinderella in the corner, felt rather solemn and shabby in her high black cashmere frock, with a spray of orchids, thrust into her hand by Noel Darke, and pinned by her own fingers at her breast, for sole ornament.

She sat between Mr. Darke, who was kind, but more interested in his dinner than in her, and a bluff, red-faced, jovial, middle-aged gentleman, whom they addressed familiarly as "Admiral," but whose real name was Captain Lansdell. He was very jocose, very anxious to be amusing and agreeable to Cinderella, and was evidently a great favorite with the family.

There was one other guest, whose name was Colonel Cressingham. He was a slender man of military appearance, looking evidently younger

than he was, with thin hair, which was perhaps only fair, but perhaps turning gray, and a well-trimmed, drooping mustache, darker than his hair. He was much less noisy than Captain Lansdell, but appeared to be an old friend, also.

Before dinner was over Alison was getting rather anxious about her train, and as soon as she got outside the dining-room door she took leave of Mrs. Darke and her daughter and asked for her hat and jacket.

When she was ready to start, good-natured Carrie came into the hall and said:

"If you're in a hurry, I can show you a nearer way to the station. Come with me."

Alison followed her along a narrow passage to a garden door, which she unbolted. It opened upon an angle of the house, where a long, windowless, red-brick building, partly screened by shrubs, jutted out at right angles to the main building.

"That's the gallery," said Carrie, "where papa's pictures and curiosities are. He's got a collection worth a quarter of a million," she added, with what seemed to Alison pardonable, if childish, pride. "You run along to the end of the blank wall of the gallery, and then you will find yourself in a path that slants off to the road, and then you'll know where you are. It cuts off five minutes. Good-bye."

She smiled as she shook hands, and said she hoped Miss Clevely would come again; and, full of the exciting pleasures of the day, Alison ran

along the path as directed, and found herself, as Carrie had said, in the slanting walk that led to the road.

But she had scarcely got clear of the wall of the gallery when she heard on her left a strange sound like a stifled, muffled cry; and, stopping short instinctively, she made out that a woman's voice, choking and gasping, was trying to cry: "Don't! For mercy's sake, don't! I won't tell. Oh, I swear it! Don't! oh, don't!"

That these were the words she heard Alison could not be absolutely sure, so indistinct were they, so muffled, so low. But she had heard enough to make her sure that something was wrong, and she dashed into the shrubs on her left, in the darkness, and cried out as she went:

"Who's there? Who's there?"

There was another cry, stifled, faint. Alison cried out in her turn, "Help!" as she ran, tearing her way through the bushes as best she could, in a thick plantation, through which she could with difficulty force a passage.

As she got clear of the bushes she stopped with a cry of surprise, for she found that she was on the very brink of the river. At the same moment she heard another faint cry, a loud splash, and the water dashed up into her face from a dark object that disappeared from her eyes under the ripples of the river.

"Help!" cried she. "Murder!"

For what she had seen for an instant as it touched the surface of the water and then went



down before her startled, staring eyes, was a woman—the woman whose cries she had heard.

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## CHAPTER II.

“HELP! Murder!”

The voice of Alison, as she cried out again, sounded even to her own ears shrill and weak; for, indeed, she was so utterly overcome with the horror of what she had seen and what she imagined that she was scarcely in full possession of her senses.

She felt as if her mind was wandering as she stared in the darkness down into the water, which was still in ripples below her. She could hear no sound among the trees and bushes behind her to indicate that the perpetrator of what she believed to be a daring murder was escaping through the plantation.

She almost began to doubt the evidence of her own eyes and ears, until, watching the water, and still crying for help, she saw, a few yards further away than the spot where she had seen the woman disappear, a dark object rising to the surface, and then again sinking without a sound or a movement.

And she knew that the woman must be dead.

“Help!” she cried once more, and as she did

so she plunged into the rough grass on her left, following the course of the stream, hoping against hope to see the body brought by the stream within her reach before it was too late.

But she saw nothing more, and, indeed, she realized as she stumbled along how helpless she would be to save a drowning person even if the poor creature were brought by the stream to her very feet; for Alison knew nothing about the rules for restoring animation, and it was rather a hideous fascination which kept her eyes fixed upon the water than any hope that she could save the unhappy woman whose dying cries she thought she had heard.

At last she caught her foot in a low wire fence which was hidden by the brushwood, and was thrown so violently upon her face that for the first few moments she felt half-stunned; and when she raised herself from the wet grass and looked about her, the last sign of the tragedy she had witnessed had disappeared, and the river was flowing as calmly as if it never held ugly secrets in its bosom.

What was she to do? The horror of her position seized her with a sudden icy grip. Here was she, a stranger in the place, the witness of what was, what must be, the ugliest of tragedies, and the only people to whom she could address herself were her employer of the afternoon and his family, persons whom she had seen but once, and to whom she shrank from broaching so horrible a subject.

Yet what other course was open to her? She was, in all probability, the only human being who knew anything of this terrible thing that had happened. She could not go away with the story untold; and though, of course, it was open to her to find out the nearest police station and to make a statement there, it seemed to her that, as this had happened in Mr. Darke's grounds, he was the person who ought to be told of it first.

Then, he would know better than she could what to do.

Trembling from head to foot, therefore, Alison resolved to make her way back to the house. But this was not so easy. The grounds were large, and she had never been in them till that afternoon; the darkness, too, added to her difficulties, and she could not carry out her plan, which was to follow the course of the river, keeping close to it until she came in sight of the house, for she soon came to a wooden paling, which, in the darkness, she thought it best not to attempt to climb.

Retracing her steps, therefore, with a shudder of horror as she reflected that she must be going over the very ground on which the death-struggle had taken place, she tried to return to the path by the way she had come.

It was with infinite relief that, as she crashed through bushes and stumbled over creeping roots, she heard a man's rough voice and a crackling of branches not many yards away.

"Hallo!" said the voice. "Who's there?"

"It's I—a woman. I've seen a woman fall into

the river, or else she was thrown in. She was crying out for help. But I could do nothing. It was just here, just here. I've been calling, calling for a long time."

Her voice was so husky, so broken, that it is doubtful whether the man heard all that she said. But, guided by the sound, he came through the plantation, while a boy's shrill voice called out:

"Yes. That's what I heard. I heard her calling out, 'Help! Murder!'"

In another moment two figures emerged from the bushes; the one was an errand boy with a parcel under his arm; the other, to Alison's great relief, was a policeman.

She thought his coming would take off her hands the necessity for the statement she dreaded.

But the moment he looked at her she was seized with the uncomfortable idea that he looked upon her as a suspected person.

"What were you doing here, miss?" he asked, shortly.

She gave him all the details as clearly as she could. Meanwhile he looked at the river, and down at the grass round about.

There was not much to be discovered by such light as was available.

"You'd better come to the house along o' me and make a statement," suggested he. Then, as she demurred: "And then, if you'll go with me to the station and make a statement there, that'll be all that's necessary."

The boy was peering up at them, absorbed in interest. He knew, too, that the policeman suspected her, and he was feeling the most intense excitement over the whole affair. Even at that moment the horrible, half-comic, half-tragic notion seized Allison that this boy was hoping she might prove to be a murderess, that he might revel in the thought that he was close to such an interesting person!

They scrambled through the plantation, with which they were all unacquainted, and stumbled, rather by accident than design, upon the path Alison had been following when the woman's cries first reached her ears.

Meanwhile the policeman was asking questions as they went, and over and over again he persisted in suggesting that she must have seen or heard something more than she had told; if, as she said, she had heard the woman's cries for help, she must have heard somebody else's voice, also.

"If she was a-crying out as she was being murdered," he remarked, persuasively, "she couldn't have cried it out to herself, now, could she?"

Although Alison was struck by the strangeness of the fact that she had neither heard nor seen any one but the woman, she could only persist in her perfectly truthful statement: she had heard no voice but the woman's and she had seen no figure but hers.

They had by this time reached the path that ran alongside the great red brick building which

contained Mr. Darke's famous collection. But as it was the front, and not the back, of the house that they wanted, they all struck off, the policeman in the rear, into a path which ran under the end of the gallery and round to the front of the house, past the kitchens and outbuildings.

But before they reached these they had to pass alongside the northern wall of the gallery, which was lighted on this side by a row of small windows high above the ground.

Suddenly the policeman stopped, and the boy and Alison turned to see what was the matter. He was examining the border under the brick wall of the gallery, and as they turned he drew himself up and said :

"You go on to the house, miss. I'll follow."

The girl obeyed at once. The boy hesitated, divided between his hope that he was escorting a murderess and his curiosity to know what it was that attracted the policeman. Finally, impelled by an imperious wave of the constable's hand, he decided to follow her; and it was in the company of this bootmaker's boy, with his parcel under his arm, that Alison presented herself once more at the front door of Riverscourt, and told the footman who opened it that she wanted to see Mr. Darke.

The man seemed surprised, as well he might. Her fall in the wet grass had left its marks on her clothes, and then there was the errand boy!

"Mr. Darke's still at dinner, miss," said he. "Couldn't you leave a message?"

"No. I must see him—I must."

Then the shrill voice of the errand boy broke in:

"There's been a murder in your grounds."

The immediate consequence of this startling announcement was that the footman attempted to shut the door in their faces. But Alison's spirit was roused by this treatment, and she got into the house. The boy followed her example, to the great indignation of the footman, who imprudently engaged in a personal tussle with him, which reached the ears of Peverell Darke, who came out of the drawing-room to find out what was the matter.

"Miss Clevely!" cried he, in astonishment. "Back again! Have you missed your train? Didn't Noel catch up with you? By Jove! what have you done to yourself? You're quite green!"

She was shaking from head to foot. Oppressed by a sense of the incongruity of this awful story she had to tell with the atmosphere of light-hearted enjoyment which pervaded the house, she found the words sticking in her throat. It was again the errand-boy who explained matters.

"I heard her calling 'murder,' and I ran and fetched a p'liceman, and when we come to her in your grounds, by the river, she said as how she'd seen a woman thrown in," said he, glibly.

Peverell did not look alarmed or shocked; he stared at them with simple incredulity.

"By Jove!" was all he said.

It was clear he thought the champagne at din-

ner had got into Miss Clevely's head. Then another thought struck him.

"And what have you done with the policeman?" said he.

"He stayed behind in your garden, sir, where the long wall runs that's got the little windows in the top."

By this time Carrie had appeared in the distance, and now Mrs. Darke came out from the drawing-room, also.

"Such a lark, mother," said Peverell. "Miss Clevely's seen a ghost!"

"A ghost!" cried Carrie. "I thought you said something about a woman!"

Alison saw that she would not get much further until she had to deal with one of the men of the family, and at once addressing Mrs. Darke, who drew back a little, evidently more shocked by her disreputable appearance than by the fragments she had gathered of the story, said:

"Can I see Mr. Darke, or Mr. Noel, or Mr. Swithin?"

Her manner was so quiet, so earnest, that it began to dawn upon Mrs. Darke that she must be heard, after all. The lady hesitated one moment, and then herself beckoned Alison to follow her to the dining-room, which was on the right. Probably she would not have taken her there, but that she saw in the girl unmistakable signs of a determination to go there unescorted unless she did so.

Alison was in a state of the utmost agitation



when she entered the dining-room. There sat Mr. Darke, urbane and handsome, in his arm-chair at the end of the table. And there, one on each side of him, sat Colonel Cressingham, distinguished-looking and well groomed, and bluff, genial Captain Lansdell. Neither Swithin nor Noel was there; but these three gentlemen, laughing and enjoying their wine and cigars, their white shirt-fronts glistening in the candle-light, formed such a picture of easy, refined enjoyment against the background of oak and tapestry that again Alison felt oppressed by the sense that she was come like a stormy petrel to the shores of a summer sea.

Apparently Captain Lansdell had been telling a "good story," for it was his bluff, deep tones which struck upon the ear as the door opened, while both the other gentlemen had their heads back and their lips parted, as if they had been enjoying a hearty laugh.

When the door first opened they hardly noticed it. But when Mrs. Darke advanced into the room the Colonel turned his head, and, seeing her, immediately rose.

Mr. Darke looked round the fruit and flowers in surprise.

"Oh—er—Jo, my dear——" she began. And then she hesitated.

"What is it, my love?"

She advanced a little further into the room, and spoke deprecatingly:

"The typewriting young lady has come back,

and wants to see you. She tells a most extraordinary story."

By this time Captain Lansdell was on his feet, opposite to the Colonel, and the eyes of all three gentlemen were fixed upon Alison, as she made her appearance, like a battered and disreputable specter, in her torn and grass-stained dress, by the side of the resplendent Mrs. Darke, in her velvet and diamonds. She could not but be conscious of the disadvantage she was at; indeed, the ghastly sight she had witnessed had already dwindled to a sort of vision in her mind, in the face of the incredulity of everybody, and of the mysterious circumstances. It was with a great effort that she spoke.

"I'm sorry—dreadfully sorry, to have to come here—to have to come back—and tell you this dreadful thing. But I saw—really, with my own eyes, I saw some one fall into the river, in your grounds, only a few minutes ago. I called for help, and a policeman came, and a boy; and I told them, but I think they scarcely believed me. And I thought, as you must hear all about this—whatever it is that has happened—I ought to come and tell you myself the little I knew."

She spoke in a dead silence; it was as if she had been alone in the room. And when she finished there was a pause, during which no one spoke or moved. Relieved, and anxious to get away, she was about to turn toward the door, when the Colonel's voice, very low, but in the

tones of utter incredulity to which she was getting accustomed, broke the silence.

Just as Peverell had done, he merely said, "By Jove!" But the words and the tone made Alison redden with anger. And at the same moment she saw Captain Lansdell shrug his shoulders and smile derisively.

Stung to the quick, she said, hotly:

"You don't believe me, I see. But they will listen to me at the police station."

Her tone was, indeed, not much more courteous than theirs. For Captain Lansdell said, drily:

"The police station? Why don't you go there, then?"

Mr. Darke, speaking for the first time, broke in upon them sharply.

"Hush, hush!" said he, in a tone of dignified reproach, and with a reproving glance from one to the other of his companions. And then he spoke to the girl, not as they had done, and without that tone of utter disbelief which they had all used.

"Miss Clevely, you mustn't be angry or surprised that what you say takes our breath away. You say you saw some one fall into the river, and you didn't try to get him out?"

At once it was easier for her to speak, now that she felt she would be listened to.

"I haven't told you quite all," she panted out. "It was a woman I saw, and I'm sure—almost sure—that her falling into the river was—not accidental."

She had startled them all in earnest at last. She could hear the laugh die on Captain Lansdell's lips, and by an abrupt movement of the Colonel's she learned that he, also, was startled by her words.

Mr. Darke looked earnestly across the table into her face.

"Do you mean that she was thrown in?" he asked, incredulously. "Do you mean you saw some one push her or throw her into the river?"

Alison hesitated.

"N—no, I can scarcely say that. But *I had heard her calling out*. Even as she fell in I heard her cry for help. There! That's all! That's all I know. As for helping her, I couldn't. And that's another reason why I think it was not a mere fall. Wouldn't she have been close to the bank if she'd fallen in? But she was right out in the water, right out. *I saw the body floating away!*"

Alison was not specially nervous or delicate or sickly. But the effort it cost her to give them all these dreadful details, and the shuddery feeling which the remembrance roused in her when she tried to impress what she had seen upon these men, who scarcely believed her, were too much for the girl. The room seemed to spin round when she reached the last word, and she fell into something, whether into a chair or into somebody's arms she did not know.

Alison did not lose consciousness, but the sights and sounds around her were confused, and

ran into one another, so that she did not know who was speaking or remember clearly where she was. Then suddenly she knew that she was drinking something, something held by a plump white hand with jewels on it.

And then everything became sharp and vivid again, and she was conscious that they disbelieved her no longer. The Colonel had opened the window, that she might have more air; the Captain was standing with a decanter in his hand, to replenish the glass if she wanted more wine. Mrs. Darke was murmuring kind words rather incoherently in her ear, while poor Mr. Darke was making awkward efforts to rise, clutching the table as he did so, and telling her across the room to cheer up and not to give way.

Alison rose quickly to her feet, for she wanted to get away, and she had a sudden and most unpleasant remembrance of the fact that she must have lost her train, the very last which would take her back to London that night.

Then the first words that she understood clearly were uttered by Mrs. Darke. Suddenly standing erect, and looking round the room, that lady said:

“What’s become of Swithin—and Noel?”

Her husband it was who answered her.

“Noel went off, I believe, to see Miss Clevely to the station, but he must have missed her somehow. And I sent Swithin for a bottle of my old port.”

Mrs. Darke stared at him.

"You sent *Swithin*—to the cellar!" she said, incredulously.

And the words divulged one of the family secrets. Alison thought, being by this time again in full possession of her wits, and perhaps abnormally keen to notice little things, that all the gentlemen seemed rather perturbed by these words. But before there was time for any more conversation the door of the room was opened by a footman, who went round the table to his master and said:

"There's a policeman in the hall, sir, who asks if he may have the favor of a word with you."

Mr. Darke looked concerned, and nodded gravely at the typewriter girl.

"It's about this business, of course," said he. "Now, I think you must all see that there was something more than fancy in Miss Clevely's story."

Both the Colonel and Captain Lansdell were, indeed, by this time almost as much perturbed as Alison herself had been, and Mrs. Darke was voluble with dismay.

"Bring him in here, and I'll take him through to the billiard-room," said Mr. Darke.

The footman obeyed immediately, and ushered in the very policeman whom the boy had called at Alison's cries. Here, then, was some sort of corroboration of her story, for she knew that the man had discovered something as he came toward the house.

"Beg pardon, sir, but could I have two minutes' talk with you privately?"

"Certainly, constable. Lend me an arm, if you please, and we'll go into this next room."

The man came forward, and Mr. Drake raised himself by his help and walked, in the same stiff and yet feeble fashion as before, into the adjoining room.

All were silent for a few moments, and Alison looked timidly at Mrs. Darke, not knowing whether to go or to stay to hear what the policeman had to say.

And then there was a sound as of some one lurching against the door that led from the hall, and, as they all turned their heads in that direction, it burst open and Swithin came in, evidently intoxicated, and as evidently in a tumult of rage.

"So, gentlemen," he stammered out, speaking thickly, and reeling against the table as he spoke, "I was sent away, was I, so that you might enjoy yourselves while I was out of the way? Do you think I don't know that? Do you think I'm too much of a fool to understand your tricks? I was got out of the way, I say, while you and the Captain here, and—and my father——"

While the Colonel crossed the room rapidly toward him and, seizing him by the arm, held him up and prevented the damage with which his unsteady movements threatened everything on the table, Swithin suddenly glared round the room and asked:

"Where is my father? And—and where's Noel? Have you told him about the murder?"

"Murder? What murder? What are you talking about?" said the Colonel, speaking for the first time in a voice which was like the clash of steel, so hard, so cold, so menacing were its tones, as he shook the staggering Swithin and tried to stem the tide of his idiotic speeches.

Swithin looked round him again, and this time it was as if he saw something ugly in the corners of the room.

"They said something—Peverell did—and Carrie—about—about a woman who was thrown into the river!" stammered he, in a lower voice.

Captain Lansdell's loud, hearty voice broke in:

"Oh, yes, yes, there has been talk of that. But you've picked up the wrong end of the story, as usual."

Swithin, writhing in the grip of the Colonel, turned upon him fiercely:

"What do you mean by 'as usual'? Why do you fellows always persist in taking me for a fool. Do you think I don't know there's something in this story? Do you think I suppose you'd let me have the key of the wine-cellar except to get me out of the way? And——" Again he looked round: "Where's Noel, say?"

This constant reiteration of the name of his half-brother troubled Alison vaguely. What did he mean by connecting Noel's disappearance with the dreadful thing she had seen and heard?

Before the two visitors could induce the ex-



cited and angry Swithin to be quiet Noel himself came in. He had evidently heard of the mystery that had caused so much commotion in the household, and he was very white, very much unnerved. Alison wondered whether he knew anything more than the rest did, for he looked round, not with the open amazement of one who hears a startling tale for the first time, but in an anxious, furtive manner, as if trying to get rid of an ugly thought, a haunting fear.

The moment he saw Alison his face lit up.

"Miss Clevely!" said he. "It was you who brought this news to the house, wasn't it?" And he came at once to her, lowering his voice and speaking with kind consideration for her feelings, just as his father had done.

"Yes, yes," stammered she, in a shamefaced way. "I'm so sorry, so very, very sorry! I'm afraid I'm the only person who knows anything about it, and that's not much."

Swithin, on hearing Noel's voice, burst into a harsh and mocking laugh, and began to jeer at him and to ask him whether he had been to meet Lady Rosina. But the Colonel, with a neat movement of an arm which was none the less strong for moving habitually in rather a languid fashion, flung him into a morocco-covered armchair near the fireplace with so much force that Swithin was for the first time almost sobered, or at least half-stunned, and sat, or rather lay, just as he had been thrown, with his eyes fixed stu-

pidly upon the Colonel, and his head hanging on his breast.

Noel threw one glance at him, frowned, and turned abruptly to Alison:

"Let us go out," said he, in a low voice. "I should like to ask you something."

So, while the two elder gentlemen were busy with Swithin, and Mrs. Darke was trying to stem the torrent of questions poured upon her by Peverell and Carrie, who had followed Noel into the room, he and she went out unnoticed in the general commotion, and Noel led the way to one of the oriel windows in the hall, where they could sit in the shadow of the drawn curtains, out of the heat and turmoil of the scene they had just left.

Then he bent down and put his head in his hands.

"Tell me just what you saw and heard," said he, in a sort of muffled voice. "Everything. I've only heard the story in fragments. You saw a woman thrown into the water. Well, did you see any one else? And what was the woman like?"

"Indeed, I can't tell you. It all happened so quickly, and it was so dark, that every now and then I begin to ask myself whether I really saw and heard anything at all; and I shan't feel quite sure about it till I hear what the policeman has to say to your father."

He raised his head quickly and, in the darkness behind the curtains, peered curiously into her

face. It was evident that he was more disturbed by the story than any one else had been.

"Have you any idea," she asked, with a sudden inspiration, "who the woman was, or *the other one?*"

His answer was short, sharp, decisive:

"No, indeed, I've not. Why do you ask?"

His tone was almost fierce, she thought. Alison stammered, hesitated.

"You—you seemed so—so much distressed, so——"

"It's a nasty thing to happen in the grounds of one's own place," said he, almost testily. "We shall have the grounds overrun to-morrow. And you—do you know that if there's anything found you will have to appear at the inquest as a witness——"

"Yes," answered she, tremulously, "I'd thought of that. It's dreadful. And when I can tell so little!"

He stood up suddenly, and she began again to think of her train. But before she could speak he turned upon her quite sharply and said:

"Don't let us talk any more about it. Let's—let's talk of—of something else! Why did you run away so quickly after dinner? You might have known we wouldn't let you go by yourself in the dark to the station. As a matter of fact, you were hardly out of the room when I was out, too; but already you had disappeared."

"I had my train to catch."

"You had not even said good-bye—to me, at any rate."

She laughed rather nervously.

"People in my position are not expected to say good-bye."

"Is that kind—to me?"

"Well, no, to you—it isn't. You are the last person in the world to make any woman feel—what we all of us have to feel sometimes when we earn our own living."

"I am glad you do me so much justice. You must do me more. If I'd guessed that I was to bring into your life the terrible experience you have just gone through, I'd—I'd have cut off my right hand first!"

"Hush!" said Alison, frightened by his tone. "You mustn't say that!"

He looked her straightforwardly, honestly, in the eyes, his own glowing with passion as only those steady gray eyes can glow. It was like the flash of hot steel.

"Why not?" said he, abruptly.

It had come upon her so suddenly, this knowledge which was now laid bare before her, the knowledge that he had more than a sentiment for her, that what he felt was passion, that she shuddered and drew back into the folds of the curtain. He noticed the movement, and, in an instant grown very gentle, he said:

"You needn't shrink away like that. You don't think I'd hurt you, do you? Still, you must answer; why mustn't I say what I did?"

He had forced her into a corner, as it were, and she felt that, once for all, she must stand up to him, she must say the words which would cut her off from this new, exquisitely delightful acquaintance, this new world of pleasure and luxury and harmless enjoyment, now and forever. For, though they were both born about the same time, she had gone through the years of lonely work that made one old, while he had basked in the sunshine from his childhood, and knew little or nothing of life's seamy side.

Alison made her tone and manner as prim as she could.

"I only meant," said she, "that your words were rather extravagant, considering the circumstances."

"I don't think so. Extravagance means that one says more than one feels. I did not. I meant all that I said—and more."

Alison turned abruptly and tried to go through the curtains into the hall.

"I'm forgetting my train."

"No, you're not. Look here, we must talk this out. It's important. Now, confess, you wouldn't have said what you've just said to me"—he had placed himself so that she could not well get away without fumbling in an undignified way with the curtains—"if you hadn't heard something that cad Swithin said this afternoon, something about Lady Rosina?"

She was startled by this challenge. Made bold by his boldness, she drew herself up and said, as

coolly and as sharply as if she had had a perfect right to put the question :

"Who is Lady Rosina?"

Before he could answer, before she could realize the daring of her own question, they heard the dining-room door burst open and the voice of Mrs. Darke calling, in a frightened tone :

"Miss Clevely! Where is Miss Clevely?"

"Here I am," said Alison, as, shamefaced and blushing, she came out of her hiding-place, revealing the fact that Noel had been her companion in this retreat. I—I am going——"

But Mrs. Darke interrupted her, haughtily, snappishly.

"No, you are not going. You are to remain in the house to-night, if you please. The policeman thinks it best, and Mr. Darke insists. This horrid affair that you brought us news of has to be inquired into fully in the morning."

The girl could not protest; she was thunder-struck. For there was that in her face, and in the faces of the three men seen through the doorway of the dining-room behind her, which told her that there was some suspicion of her, some suspicion that made her shudder and turn cold—in the minds of them all.

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### CHAPTER III.

ALISON CLEVELY had never been through any experience so terrible as that of the sudden

change from light to darkness which she had to undergo that evening at Riverscourt.

Just a few hours before she seemed to have dropped unexpectedly into a new world, all luxury and sunshine. Every one was kind to her; she saw nothing round her but smiling and approving faces. To crown all, she had had that delightful walk in the garden with Noel Darke, she had heard from his lips the sweetest words that had ever fallen upon her ear; she had felt that with every breath she drew in peace and kindness and happiness.

Now, in a few short hours, all was changed. Through no fault of her own she had been made a messenger of evil, and, to add to her misery, she saw in every face a dark look of mistrust and suspicion.

Every face but Noel's.

And if he still looked kindly upon her, there was evident so much distress and anxiety in his mind that he was unable to note the looks cast upon her by the rest.

Alison could only suppose that it was something the policeman had said to Mr. Darke that had brought about this change. The man stood, with his helmet in his hand, bolt upright, just outside the dining-room doorway, looking fixedly at her, but with an expression of face too professional for her to know in what light he regarded her. On the faces of the Colonel and Captain Lansdell, however, there was an expression impossible to mistake. That they thought her

guilty of some misdemeanor was evident enough; surely they could not suppose, as the errand-boy had done, that she was a murderess!

On the easily read faces of the two ladies she saw a different look—suspicious, indeed, but by no means so inimical as that on the faces of the gentlemen. And she gathered that, though they looked upon her with mistrust, they had, for reasons of prudence, not been taken so fully into Mr. Darke's confidence as the others.

As for Swithin, he was by this time half-asleep in one of the chairs in the dining-room, while Mr. Darke himself was in another chair, and too far away from Alison, who stood in the hall, for her to be able to see whether he looked as unfriendly as did the others.

Never in her life, before or since, did Alison feel quite so forlorn as she did then. Her dress, torn, stained and wet with dew, clung damply and uncomfortably round her limbs; she felt cold to the very marrow. But the very injustice of this sudden misery which had come upon her roused her spirit, and, with a sudden flash of resentment, she said:

"If I am wanted as a witness by the police, of course I must give up all thoughts of going back to town to-night. But I won't stay here. You," and she turned to the policeman, "will find me a lodging in the town, will you not?"

The man reddened, looked surprised, and shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. But Noel uttered an exclamation of anger, and, turn-



ing abruptly to Mrs. Darke, who was confused at this retort, said :

“What on earth do you mean by speaking to Miss Clevely in that tone? What has she done? What could she do but bring us at once the news of what she had seen?”

The warmth with which he took her part came upon Alison’s overwrought feelings almost with the force of a blow. She turned to him, murmured some faltering words of thanks, and then, to her own surprise and to the discomfiture of everybody, burst into tears.

Then, from his distant armchair, Mr. Darke, too, spoke up.

“Marion!” he cried, “I’m really surprised. The poor girl has done the only proper thing, the only right thing, in coming straight to us. Miss Clevely, I apologize for my wife’s inhospitality, and I beg you to overlook it, and to do me—*me*, the honor of remaining in my house!”

The effect of these words, pronounced deliberately and in a sonorous voice from the depth of the long dining-room, and ringing out clearly through the hall, may be imagined. There was a movement in the group, a whispering in the crowd of servants who were hidden somewhere in the background; the policeman saluted the company and went out of the house while certain half-apologetic speeches reached Alison’s ears from the various persons present, of which she only caught one distinctly: it was Peverell’s.

“Don’t you be afraid. If you have murdered

anybody—why, I'm sure it was somebody unpleasant who was better out of the way. The guv'nor and me'll back you up, and Noel, too; see if we don't!"

Half-laughing in the midst of her tears, Alison struggled to regain her composure, and to reply civilly to Mrs. Darke's frightened attempts at conciliation. It was evident that Mr. Darke was master in his own house, and that as long as she had him for an ally she might snap her fingers at animosity from the rest.

That there was still an antagonistic feeling toward her in the minds of the two visitors, Colonel Cressingham and Captain Lansdell, she felt sure. The Captain bade her good-night civilly, indeed, though without any great cordiality. But in the Colonel's cold blue eyes she saw a look which made her bite her lips again to keep back the tears.

Of Noel, Alison felt so much afraid that she carefully avoided exchanging another word with him that night; she knew that, in her agitated state, she could not bear to meet his sympathetic eyes without another hysterical outbreak.

When she was alone in the room they assigned her, a lovely apartment, furnished with darkest mahogany and hung with pale blue, she recovered her self-possession and reviewed the events of the day with a quieter mind.

Whatever had happened, whatever part she might have to play in the forthcoming inquiry, one thing was certain: she must make up her

mind, once for all, never to have anything to do with this family again.

And the reason was all summed up in one word: Noel.

Astonishing as it seemed, there could be no doubt that Noel loved her—*her*, a girl whom he could not be said to have known before that day. And just as surely as he loved her, so she loved him, passionately, sincerely. And, whatever might be the strength or the weakness of the sentiment he had for her, Alison knew that what she felt for him then she would feel as long as her life lasted.

For this infatuation, if it was an infatuation, she had, indeed, reasonable excuse. Noel Darke, so long, by his outward attractiveness, the hero of her secret dreams, had suddenly shown himself to her in the light of a deliverer from the prison of commonplace, from the dreary waste of city and suburb life. His good-nature had singled her out for what was to her a peep into paradise; and what good nature had begun the conversation she had since had with him had finished; and Alison, who had never frittered her heart away on chance flirtations, had never condescended to the exchange of idle whispers and glances, now felt all the more surely under the influence of this strong new passion, which glowed in her veins and glistened in her eyes, and made her for very shame anxious to avoid rather than to meet him.

For if he loved her, what was that but an added anxiety, an added danger?

Kind as Mr. and Mrs. Darke had been, and as they had taught their children to be, to persons whom they employed, she knew very well the gulf there was between the girl who came to Rivers-court to work and the girl who came to play. Who, too, was Lady Rosina?

In all the anxiety she felt about the investigation which was to take place on the morrow, and the share she would have to bear in the police inquiry, Alison, knowing well that she could clear herself of any suspicion that might yet lurk in the minds of those who knew even less about the mystery of the drowned woman than she did, thought much less of the tragedy in which she bore so strange a part than of Noel Darke and this unknown Lady Rosina.

She was too much excited to sleep well, and in the early morning she sat for a long time at one of the windows of her beautiful room, busy with the cleansing and repairing of her dress, and pausing from time to time in her work to look out at the pretty sight presented by the morning sunshine on the fruit-blossom in the garden.

Her room was on the side of the house furthest from the river, and was over the dining-room. It was still not much more than six o'clock when she heard footsteps on the gravel walk below, and opening a window softly, she saw two policemen, the one she had seen on the previous night and another, stooping to examine the ground at the

very spot by the long red wall where the constable had stopped on his way to the house with the errand-boy and herself.

Alison drew her head in and noiselessly shut the window; there was now no doubt that he had made a discovery.

When she went downstairs at the sound of the breakfast gong the first persons she saw were Noel and the Colonel, walking together on the lawn outside the breakfast-room, in earnest conversation. The Colonel had his hand within Noel's arm and Noel was listening with grave attention to what he was saying.

She was quite startled to hear Mr. Darke's voice behind her, and turning as he said, "Good morning, Miss Clevely!" she found him close to her in his wheeled chair.

It was not until she had returned his greeting, and felt considerably comforted by the kindly pressure of his hand, that he caught sight of the two figures on the lawn outside, and then the expression which came over his face alarmed her.

He seemed not only angry, but appalled, as if some wholly unexpected and distasteful sight had just met his eyes.

But all that Alison could see was that the Colonel and Noel were talking earnestly together; and when she glanced from them again to Mr. Darke's face the look she had seen upon it had disappeared as quickly as it came.

Five minutes later the whole of the household,

including the guests, were assembled, while Mr. Darke read family prayers.

The solitary exception was Captain Lansdell, who put in an appearance just as the servants filed out of the room, and who remarked in a jocular manner that "church once a week was enough for an old salt like him!"

The conventional breakfast-table reserve was strong upon them all, doubtless increased by vivid memories of the previous evening's adventure. Swithin scarcely uttered a single word throughout the progress of the meal; Mr. Darke tried to keep up just enough conversation to prevent the social atmosphere from becoming glacial; Mrs. Darke was slightly peevish; Carrie was decidedly so; Noel glanced frequently at Alison, but said little; the two guests paid more attention to kidneys and bacon, deviled bones and marmalade, than to their companions; and Peverell amused himself by discharging bread-pellets from a surreptitious catapult at a fat Irish terrier that worried everybody by whining for tit-bits.

Breakfast was nearly over when a footman announced to his master in a low voice that the police had come again.

"Show them in, show them in at once," said Mr. Darke.

His wife looked up with a flushed face.

"My Dear Jo! Here! At breakfast-time!" expostulated she.

"Why not?" said he. "We are all interested in this matter and anxious to know all there is

to be known, especially poor Miss Clevely, who had such a terrible fright last night." And he turned to smile kindly at the young girl. "You're not afraid of the policemen, are you?"

"Afraid! Oh, no, oh, no," said she, reddening to the roots of her hair, and involuntarily meeting another glance from Noel, which all but destroyed her self-possession.

The footman still lingered, and it suddenly became apparent to all that he had something of still greater importance to communicate.

"If you please, sir, there's something else I have to tell you." All eyes were fixed upon the man as he went on: "Anne Saunders, sir, the second kitchen-maid, is—is missing."

"Missing!"

Alison sat upright with a great shock. Exclamations broke from every lip. Swithin burst, for the first time, into a mocking ejaculation; he pushed his chair back and stared fixedly and deliberately at his half-brother Noel.

Mr. Darke paid no attention to him, or to anybody but the footman. Wheeling his chair sharply round, so as to meet the man eye to eye, he said:

"Anne Saunders—missing?"

"Yes, sir. She went out, it seems, last evening, without permission, to post a letter. And—and she's never come back, sir."

Mrs. Darke was sobbing hysterically; Carrie was white with horror. As for the rest, they were too much interested to move or to utter a sound.

Mr. Darke looked immeasurably shocked.

"Why was I not told of this before?" he asked, sternly. "It must have been known last night."

"Well, sir, things were at sixes and sevens in the servants' hall last night, and—and we didn't quite like, sir, to mention it, hoping she'd turn up, however late, sir."

"The police must know of this," said Mr. Darke, suddenly.

"They do, sir. They've found it out, and something else, too, I think. They say they've got a theory, sir."

Then the Colonel's voice was heard for the first time; he laughed shortly.

"Of course!" he sneered. And then he dropped again into silence.

There was another short pause, and then Mr. Darke said:

"Bring in the policemen."

They could not have been very far from the door, for the moment it was opened by the footman they came in—first the man they had already seen, and after him the superintendent, a tall, broad-shouldered man, with a thick black mustache and intelligent black eyes.

"Well, and have you found out anything?" asked Mr. Darke at once.

"Yes, sir. We've found some marks on the wall above where the flower-bed was trampled upon outside your house; it looks as if an attempt had been made to get in."

Every face at the table wore an expression of



intense interest, and in answer to Mr. Darke's further questions the superintendent said:

"I should be glad, sir, if you would examine your picture gallery and see if anything has been touched."

"I will—at once," said Mr. Darke, as he wheeled his chair away from the table.

An exclamation from Swithin, who brought his hand down upon the table with a blow which made the cups rattle, attracted not only his father's attention, but that of everybody else.

"Noel!" cried he, sharply, and leaning across the white cloth he stared at his half-brother with his cunning light eyes. "*You* were in the garden, passing close under the wall of the gallery, after dinner—directly after—dinner last night!"

The first impression made upon everybody by this sudden attack was one of amazement and disgust. But when Noel, instead of replying indignantly, grew crimson and then pale, and made no attempt to answer, there succeeded to the first feeling of astonishment one of dismay.

As for Alison, she felt as if the roof of the world had fallen in, so unexpected, so disturbing was his agitation, his silence.

Before anybody else had recovered his presence of mind Swithin pressed his advantage, and said, in a loud, aggressive tone:

"Were you there, or were you not?"

Noel raised his head and met his half-brother's eyes steadily.

"Yes, I was there," said he, quietly.

"You don't deny it?"

"No! how can I deny it, when it was you who let me out?"

All the rest sat as if under a spell while this altercation went on between the two young men across the breakfast-table, where the eggs and buttered toast were being left to get cold.

"Yet you deny that you saw anything?"

The answer made all hold their breath.

"Have I denied it? I think not."

"You did see something, then?"

"Yes."

"What was it?"

Noel stood up, pale, grave, but firm.

"I will tell what I saw at the proper time, in the proper place; but not here, and not to you."

And with that, no one daring to hinder him, he left the room.

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## CHAPTER IV.

THERE was dead silence at the breakfast-table for some moments after Noel had gone out. Then Swithin burst into a loud laugh. The two police officials moved uneasily, and Mr. Darke, who had wheeled himself away from the table preparatory to going out, reproved his eldest son in a very sharp tone.

"Swithin, have you lost your senses?"

Mr. Darke's was the one voice the scapegrace respected, and the young man looked up sullenly, but looked down again without an answer. His father went on:

"Whatever Noel may know he has too much good sense to blurt out at this stage. There is, unhappily, no doubt that one crime at least has been attempted; and while it still remains a mystery, it would be madness in Noel, if he has any information that we have not, to divulge it till the proper time comes. Trial by newspaper is bad enough; we don't want trial by family gossip into the bargain."

And Mr. Darke having administered this well-merited rebuke, to the satisfaction of everybody in the room except the object of it, got Captain Lansdell to help him out of the room, which he left in company with the two police officers.

There remained the three ladies, Peverell, Swithin and the Colonel, and another awkward silence ensued, which was broken only by the soft whistling of the boy.

But at last Swithin uttered a short laugh.

"If my father's so anxious to avoid any mystery about this business that he has policemen in before we've finished breakfast," he said, "I can't see what harm there was in asking Noel what I did."

Mrs. Darke protested indignantly.

"I can see the harm," she cried. "It looks as if you thought your brother had committed a murder!"

"No, it doesn't," retorted Swithin, rudely. "I gave him an opportunity of clearing himself of all suspicion, that's all."

"Suspicion!"

"Yes, suspicion. I'm sick to death of hearing you all talk as if Noel were a paragon of perfection, when he's no better than anybody else!"

"He's a jolly sight better than you are!" piped out Peverell from the other side of the table, "and that's why you are so jealous of him."

"Jealous! I'm not jealous. I'm only tired of the fuss you make about him. And if it turns out he had a hand in this business I shan't be sorry, since it will shut your mouths for a little while to his praises."

It was with the greatest difficulty that Alison Clevely had kept silence during this ill-natured harangue, but now she could control herself no longer.

"But he's not had a hand in it," she said, sharply. "Who could be so foolish as to suggest that he had?"

"I could!" answered Swithin, boldly. "We know now that an attempt was made to break into the gallery from the outside. If Noel was there at the time, as he admits, why shouldn't he say who the attempt was made by, unless, indeed, it was made by himself?"

Carrie laughed outright.

"How absurd you are, Swithin," said she. "What should Noel want to break into the gallery for? I never heard anything so ridiculous!"

Swithin himself seemed to become conscious of the ludicrous nature of his suggestion, for he made a few grumbling remarks, half to himself, on girls and their lack of intelligence; and then, turning rudely to Alison, he said :

“So you’re in love with our hero, like all the rest of them?”

Alison’s handsome face flushed, and her great black eyes grew moist with feeling as she answered :

“No, Mr. Swithin, I’m not in love with anybody. But I’m quite ready to maintain what I’ve said, that there’s not a man in England more incapable of a foul crime, or even of a mean action, than your brother, Mr. Noel Darke.”

A voice from the doorway startled her. It was that of Mr. Darke, who, returning to the breakfast-room, and still leaning on the arm of Captain Lansdell, said approvingly, in his deliberate, clear-cut way :

“Bravo, Miss Clevely! I’m happy to be able to endorse that opinion with all my heart!”

Alison started up, crimson, confused and ashamed of her own outspokenness. She almost felt as if she had betrayed too much of her own feeling, besides presuming upon her short acquaintance with the family. To add to her embarrassment, she found Colonel Cressingham by her side, looking at her with a bold, yet veiled, approbation which she did not like. Indeed, her warm brunette beauty, under the excitement of

the strong emotion which possessed her, could have left no man unmoved.

"And I," he said, in his low voice, which scarcely traveled beyond her ears, "would endorse any opinion of yours, Miss Clevely, heard or unheard." Before she could utter a word or make a gesture of protest at this rather fulsome compliment, the Colonel turned to his host and asked: "Well, did you find anything missing or tampered with in any way?"

Mr. Darke shook his head.

"Not a thing," he said. "We went through the gallery from end to end, and it seems quite clear that, though they smashed one of the windows, the pieces of which we found on the floor, they didn't get inside."

"Ah!" said the Colonel. "And what are the police doing now?"

"They've gone out in the grounds, and I shall be glad if Miss Clevely will come, too, and give any help she can in describing just which way she went, and what she saw and heard."

The girl drew back instinctively.

"Oh, must I?" she said, faintly.

Mr. Darke looked at her with a slight frown of unconcealed anxiety.

"I hope you won't mind doing this," he said, courteously. "You see, it's important that we should know all we can. The police shan't worry you. I'd go with you myself if I could. As it is, the Colonel will go, won't you, Colonel?"

Alison, who had a vague feeling that she did

not like the Colonel, and a less vague feeling that he mistrusted and suspected her, would have preferred to go alone. But she recognized already that Mr. Darke's words were law in the establishment, and that, as he had said she was to go with the Colonel, it was with the Colonel she would have to go.

As she went upstairs to fetch her hat, Carrie ran after her, and, thrusting a good-natured hand through her arm, said :

"Don't look so miserable, Miss Clevely. I know it's horrid for you to have anything to do with this dreadful business, but papa will see that it's no worse for you than can be helped. He's just as pleased with you as we are for standing up for dear old Noel."

"How is it your elder brother speaks of him so spitefully?" asked Alison, abruptly.

"Oh, it's pure jealousy, and nothing else," said Carrie. "You see, Noel has every quality that he has not, from good looks downward. And papa makes no secret of the fact that he wishes Noel had been his eldest son. Of course, in a way, it's hard upon Swithin, or it would be if he were not so horrid. And now this affair of Lady Rosina has made it worse than ever."

"Lady Rosina! Who is Lady Rosina?" asked Alison.

"Oh, haven't you heard? Why, she's Lord Geldestone's daughter, and they've got the place on the river next to ours. When we came here they were very stand-off, indeed, and affected to

look down upon us from a great height, especially Lady Rosina, who is Lord Geldestone's only daughter, and a great heiress."

Alison looked interested, as, indeed, she felt.

"Well, then, one day last autumn she was out in a canoe, and, not being very skilful, she managed to upset it, and she either would have been drowned, or she thinks she would, if Noel hadn't come up in his skiff and fished her out. Quite romantic, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Alison, dubiously.

She felt that she hated Lady Rosina.

"After that there came about a great change in the state of affairs; the Geldestones called on us and invited us to their winter ball, and Lady Rosina showed plainly that Noel could have her for the asking."

"Well?"

"Well, that's all—at present. We heartily hope that the story will end in the good old fairy-tale way, for, of course, it would be a splendid thing for old Noel, wouldn't it?"

"I don't know. What is she like?" said Alison.

Carrie, delighted to have some one to talk to, grew rashly confidential.

"Well, that's the worst part of it. Of course, she's awfully nice, and all that—now we know her. But, unluckily, Noel doesn't like her."

Alison felt her heart leap up.

"Then why," she asked, soberly, "would it be such a good thing if he married her?"

"Don't you understand? She's an earl's daugh-



ter, to begin with, and niece of a Cabinet Minister into the bargain; and if the match were to come off we should be at the very top of the tree, you know, and could go to the balls at Buckingham House."

"I should have thought you could be happy enough without that."

"We could be happier with it," said Carrie, promptly; "and so we're all on tenterhooks till it's settled, especially as Lord and Lady Geldestone are by no means anxious for it. Only, Lady Rosina will have her own way. But, of course, her infatuation may not last, and so Noel ought to take advantage of it without delay."

Alison's face flushed.

"Now, I think," she said, presuming a little, perhaps, on the young girl's confidence, "that he's doing the only right and spirited thing by *not* taking advantage of her infatuation. Is she pretty?" she asked, suddenly.

Carrie hesitated.

"Well, not exactly, perhaps, but she has a great deal of *charm*."

Alison smiled demurely. Perhaps she thought, with the pardonable vanity of a handsome poor girl, that nobody could say that of *her*.

She had got her hat by this time, and the two girls were descending the stairs together.

At the bottom stood Noel, his handsome face still wearing a look of anxiety, but eager, alert and courteous, as he stepped forward and asked Alison to come into the garden.

"They've found the poor girl," said he, in a low voice, "drowned, as you said. It was our kitchen-maid, Anne Saunders."

Alison clasped her hands in silent horror, while Carrie cried out aloud.

"And who killed her?" cried Carrie.

"Hush!" said Noel. "Nobody knows that yet. Don't let's talk about it. Come out into the grounds. You know it must be done."

These last words he uttered in a low voice to Alison, bending his head and meeting her eyes with that look which sent a sort of shiver through her, a shiver of passionate happiness, of pride and of dread.

"Yes," she whispered back. "But it's horrible—horrible—all the same."

Their voices were low by instinct; the double instinct of the ghastly business in hand, and of their own mutual feeling. Carrie, slightly displeased though she was, remembering Lady Rosina and the family hopes, saw nothing for it but to walk on into the hall, leaving these two to linger by the staircase.

The knowledge she now had about Lady Rosina and Noel's attitude toward her imparted an irrepressible exhilaration to the feelings of the handsome Alison. If *she* had been in Lady Rosina's place now, how different would have been his feelings. An irresistible impulse prompted her to a daring question:

"Why didn't you answer me last night when I asked who Lady Rosina was?"

He looked her straight in the eyes.

"Probably because I found more interest in talking to you about yourself than in talking to you about her."

"But you are going to marry her?"

Noel began to look mischievous

"Am I?" was all he said.

And then, just as he was leading her slowly away toward the garden-door, smiling gravely at her, with an expression of mingled anxiety and delight, a door near them opened softly, and low-voiced, courteous Colonel Cressingham came out.

"Ah, Miss Clevely, I've been wondering where you were. Noel, Mrs. Darke is looking for you."

And having thus effectually displaced the younger man, the Colonel, with a smile on his lips, but with cold inquiry in his eyes, led Alison out into the grounds.

"Shocking affair, isn't it?" said he, as they sauntered along the very path by which the girl had left the house on the previous evening.

"Very."

"You know they've found the body?"

"Yes. But have they found more than that?"

He looked at her out of the corners of his eyes as he smoothed his long, fair mustache.

"They've found out that an attempt was made to break into the gallery, and the inference is that the would-be thief was surprised by this poor girl, and that he murdered her, or perhaps chased her, until she fell into the water, in the attempt to silence her as to his identity."

"I see."

Alison listened and bowed her head in silent assent to this, but, to her own surprise, she found that, even as she did so, she did not believe a single word. In the first place, she had taken a violent dislike to the Colonel, and if she had not known, by the evidence of her eyes, that he could not possibly have had a hand in the crime, she would have been quite ready to attribute it to him. But she knew that the three elder gentlemen had been chatting over their wine during the time that the tragedy was taking place, and that the Colonel could not have got away without the knowledge of Mr. Darke and Captain Lansdell.

There was a short silence. Then the Colonel said:

"I ought not to say so, perhaps, but I have an idea I know the thief."

Alison remembered that she had seen him in grave converse with Noel that morning, and her vague feeling of mistrust grew stronger.

"Indeed?" she said coldly.

He nodded.

"Of course, I haven't said a word of my idea to old Darke," he went on.

"Why not?" said Alison, feeling that there was a sort of snap in her tones, in spite of herself.

"Well, so awfully unpleasant, you know, a thing of this sort!"

Alison raised her eyes quickly to his face.

The Colonel met the gaze of her straightforward eyes with one of his usual sidelong looks.

"Well, I had an idea, don't you know—of course, it may have been quite a wrong idea—that you—well, that you knew, perhaps, just a little more than you pretended to know."

Alison, who was a shrewd girl, saw that he was probing, and decided to probe in her turn.

"Supposing I do know more?" said she, in a low voice.

The moment the words had left her lips she regretted them deeply, keenly; for the Colonel's face changed, and became so livid, so ghastly in its look of menace, that, even while she shuddered, she tried to laugh the matter off and to assure him that she really knew nothing—nothing at all—more than she had said.

But the harm was done. He asked no more questions, but that he suspected her she felt absolutely sure.

And as he walked on in silence by her side her mind was in a feverish whirl.

What was this mystery, to the very brink of which she had been dragged?

And why should the Colonel, who certainly had had no hand in the tragedy, take it so much to heart?

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## CHAPTER V.

ALISON CLEVELY was not allowed much leisure to meditate upon the reason of Colonel Cressing-

ham's interest in the tragedy. She was made to describe, as well as she could, exactly what she had seen and heard, and to point out the path she had taken on the previous night, when the woman's cries had first reached her ears.

All this for the benefit of the two policemen, and under the surveillance of the Colonel, who scarcely looked at her, but who, it seemed to her, was listening intently for the slightest deviation from the account she had previously given. She was heartily glad when the ordeal was over, and she flatly refused to see the body of the unfortunate Anne Saunders, saying emphatically that she had not seen enough to be able to help in its identification with that of the woman thrown into the water.

For that matter, there was now no doubt as to the main facts of her account and the identity of the woman whose cries she had heard with the unfortunate kitchen-maid.

Alison would have gone straight to the railway station after the morning's ordeal if she could. But objections to this course were raised not only by Noel and by Colonel Cressingham, but by the police, who wanted her evidence at the inquest, which was to take place on the following day.

Very reluctantly, therefore, and beset by a strong sense of difficulties and dangers, seen and unseen, Alison went back to the house, where she was quick to notice that Mrs. Darke's manner toward her had undergone yet another change. And the typewriter girl was shrewd enough to

guess that it was some words uttered by Carrie concerning Noel and herself which had brought about this further access of frigidity.

It would have been almost amusing to Alison at any other time to mark how the barometer of the ladies' behavior to her, starting on the previous afternoon from "Set Fair," had run down in the evening to "Changeable," and after standing on the following morning for a short time at "Fair," had since then undergone a decided change.

"It's at 'Very Dry,' now," thought Alison to herself, shrewdly. "But it looks as if it might at any moment become 'Stormy.'"

She was right. She had not been more than a few moments indoors when Lady Rosina Stoke was announced, and it was with considerable curiosity that the beautiful typewriter girl, from her modest retreat behind the aviary in the window, inspected the lady on whom all hopes *but* Noel's appeared to be fixed.

Alison, poor girl, could scarcely repress a certain feeling of satisfaction at the result. No, Lady Rosina was not pretty, decidedly not. And the "charm" spoken about by Carrie appeared to demand some degree of imagination to find. She was a tall, thin, weedy young woman of some four or five and twenty, with sloping shoulders and a thick, colorless complexion; Lady Rosina's long nose, with a marked tendency to turn up, indefinite mouth, retreating chin, and small light eyes would have sufficed, if she had not been an earl's

daughter, to secure her the reputation of being very plain. As it was, being able to do the best for herself in the matter of toilet, she was passable at her best, and it was at her best that Alison saw her.

Dressed in a fresh and pretty gown of pink and cream striped flannel, with a big black hat and a beautifying feather boa, Lady Rosina had a certain air of being "somebody." And poor little "nobody," behind the bird-cage, sighed enviously as she looked and listened while the guest, who was made much of, laid down the law without any excess of civility to her hosts.

At least, so it seemed to Alison.

"What a perfectly horrid thing to happen," was Lady Rosina's comment on the tragedy, the news of which had brought her to Riverscourt. "Now, tell me, who was it that killed the poor girl? Do you think it was Swithin?"

The doubtful taste of this suggestion made Alison's cheeks tingle. But Mrs. Darke and Carrie took it quite calmly.

"Oh, no, it couldn't possibly have been Swithin," said Mrs. Darke, most anxious for the credit of the family into which they wished Lady Rosina to enter.

"Was he with you then?" persisted Lady Rosina.

"Well, we know where he was while this horrid thing was happening," said Mrs. Darke.

"He was in the wine-cellar," explained Carrie, ingenuously. "And when he came up and heard



what had happened he stormed as if he had been left out of some delightful amusement!"

And the two girls looked at each other with a slight shrug on either side. For Swithin was an impossible person, whose vagaries were well known.

Lady Rosina sighed.

"Where's Noel?" she asked. "And what does he think of it all?"

"He'll soon be here when he knows *you* have come!" said Mrs. Darke, with a smile of meaning.

Lady Rosina smiled again complacently and walked toward the window. Here she caught sight of handsome Alison, and some instinct made her expression change. It was as if she scented a rival in the beautiful young woman with the great brown eyes, splendid figure and worn black dress, and she turned away without a word.

"I'll go and find him," volunteered Carrie.

"Oh, don't bring him in on my account," said Lady Rosina, rather coldly.

But Mrs. Darke waved her daughter toward the door with an eager bend of the head.

"He'd be so angry if we let you go without his seeing you," she said. "But you'll stay to luncheon, won't you?"

Lady Rosina did stay to luncheon. But it turned out to be a rather unfortunate circumstance, for Noel not only avoided the maneuvers to seat him beside Lady Rosina, but took the chair next to Alison, and paid her as much atten-

tion as was compatible with common courtesy to the other guest.

The family uneasiness increased as luncheon went on, for it was quite clear that Noel's conduct, innocent as it appeared, was intentional. He was nailing his colors to the mast.

It was in vain that Lady Rosina tried to distract his attention from his pretty companion and to engage him in conversation across the table. Without the least discourtesy he confined himself to replying to her direct questions, and then turned again to Alison.

Mrs. Darke could scarcely conceal her discomfiture. The Captain and the Colonel, who both perceived what was amiss, worked loyally to keep up the general conversation. Mr. Darke, who looked dignified and displeased, was quite evidently, as the family knew, working himself up for a great outburst by-and-by.

Swithin it was, of course, who set a match to the train. Lady Rosina had been growing more and more silent, more and more curt and petulant, and at last the scapegrace, with an awkward laugh, looked from Noel to her, and said, in what was scarcely an undertone:

"Very attentive, isn't he, Lady Rosina?"

She uttered a short laugh, and said, in a tone no lower than his own:

"Oh, he's quite right, of course. One must pay so much attention to that sort of people, to put them at their ease, you know!"

Noel heard her, and he looked her straight in

the face, while the blood rushed to his forehead. Then he turned at once to Alison.

"Miss Clevely, you must let me take you out on the river this afternoon," said he.

Lady Rosina heard, and she dropped into silence until they all rose. Then, as Noel was trying to insist upon Alison's going on the river, the crisis came in a violent hysterical fit on the part of the earl's daughter.

The whole family was in consternation. Poor Alison, the innocent cause of this catastrophe, fled upstairs, and remained in her room, on the plea of a headache, for the rest of the day. She sent an excuse at dinner-time, and it was not until the following morning that, pale, nervous and guilty looking, she appeared among the household once more.

Matters were made easier for her then by the fact that everybody was talking of the approaching inquest. Neither the Colonel nor the Captain had yet gone away, as the police wished for the presence at the inquest of every person who had been at Riverscourt at the time of the tragedy. Luckily for Alison, this excitement sufficed to smooth over the difficulties of her path. But she took great care to avoid Noel, and so to keep clear of further censure.

They all drove at the appointed hour to the George Hotel, in a village half a mile away, where the inquest was to be held.

Alison gave her evidence clearly, but without knowing what she said, so much was she suffering

from the strain of many emotions. But the sensation of the morning came when Noel was called.

Asked what he had seen and heard on the evening in question, he answered as follows:

"I dined at Riverscourt, and after the ladies had left the room it was suggested that I should accompany Miss Clevely to the station, as she was a stranger to the place and would not know the shortest way. I left the room, but was told by one of the servants that Miss Clevely had already started. So I went out by the front way, thinking I might overtake her. I did not then know that she had gone by the back way, the shorter way. It was dark when I started. I went by the side path that runs along by what we call the gallery, where my father's collection is. I saw what I took for a woman's skirt disappearing round the angle of the building, and I saw a man following her. The man was running."

He paused, and a pin might have been heard to drop in the crowded room.

"Did you recognize the man?"

"No."

"Did you follow him?"

"No."

"Why did you not follow him?"

"I thought it was a man who had been meeting one of the servants."

"A sweetheart?"

"Yes."

"Can you describe him?"

"Not very well. It was dark."

"Tell us the impression you got of his appearance, please."

Noel flushed suddenly, hesitated, and then said:

"He seemed to be very broad-shouldered, and he wore a pea-jacket—what looked like a pea-jacket, and a naval peaked cap. That was all I saw."

"And you have no idea who he was?"

"I cannot say that."

Noel hesitated.

"Do you know who he was?"

"A suggestion has been made to me about his identity which I think is very likely the right one. But I don't feel called upon to repeat the suggestion."

"But can you tell me this: Had you ever seen the man before?"

The answer came very decidedly:

"No. Not to my knowledge."

A few more questions elicited unimportant answers, and, indeed, the interest of the inquiry was over.

The mysterious admission of Noel was the topic of everybody's conversation; but he would not allow himself to be questioned further, nor would he tell who it was that had suggested to him the possible identity of the man he had so dimly seen.

During the whole of the inquiry Alison had been conscious that Colonel Cressingham was

watching her closely, and she knew that he was listening to the evidence she gave with an attentive ear. She wondered vaguely whether he was now satisfied as to the amount of her knowledge, or whether he still suspected her of knowing more than she had stated.

After a short consultation the jury returned a verdict of "wilful murder against some person or persons unknown," and, amid a buzz of excited comment, the proceedings ended.

Alison wished that she could escape without another word to any of the Darke family, but, as this was impossible, she went up to Mrs. Darke and bade her good-bye with formal thanks, which that lady received half-coldly, half-anxiously.

Unknown to Alison, indeed, there had been a stormy scene on her account at Riverscourt on the previous day, during which Mr. Darke had upbraided Noel for discourtesy to Lady Rosina; and Noel had replied by the announcement that he had acted deliberately, not in wilful discourtesy, but in the determination to choose a wife for himself, and not to have one chosen for him, with which intimation of his views he had closed the interview with his father by abruptly leaving the room.

Mrs. Darke, while she was delighted to get rid of Alison, was quite alive to the future danger to be apprehended from her. Indeed, Alison in the city, to which Noel went every day, was more of a peril than Alison at Riverscourt, where she was shy, shabby and inevitably rather con-

strained. The good lady took, by instinct, the best means possible out of her difficulty, and, drawing the girl on one side, frankly threw herself at her mercy, telling her that Noel had quarreled with his father on her account, and also with his fiancée.

Alison listened with set lips, cold outwardly, but inwardly on fire.

"*Fiancée!* Is that the right word, Mrs. Darke?" she asked, when the lady had finished her long speech, half-pleading, half-insolent, and wholly painful for the poor, proud girl to hear.

"Well, we all looked upon them as engaged until you—er——"

"Until I—did what, Mrs. Darke?"

"Until you became a rival to poor Lady Rosina. You see, my dear Miss Clevely, you are a very beautiful girl, and Lady Rosina is only amiable and charming, not especially handsome. So that it was a very easy conquest for you, or, rather, it would have been, if you had not been too high-spirited, as I'm sure you are, to cause a young man to quarrel with his family, to break another lady's heart, and to be disinherited on your account. For Mr. Darke would certainly leave him without a penny if——"

Alison drew her breath sharply through her lips.

"That is quite enough, Mrs. Darke," she said. "I will never speak to Noel again—if it breaks his heart—and mine, too!"

"Pray don't be so melodramatic, Miss Clevely.

Hearts are not so easily broken, believe me, especially in the City."

Then and there Alison would have rushed away, with her spirit in arms, if she had not been intercepted by Mr. Darke himself, who had just been helped out of the inn and into the waiting landau. He beckoned her kindly to him, and she saw at once that he guessed the subject of Mrs. Darke's discourse. She had seen very little of him since the day of her arrival at Riverscourt, his time having been fully occupied with the investigations into the tragedy. Alison was relieved to find that he, at least, was still kind.

Opening the door of the landau, he made her get in, and said:

"I know very well it is distasteful to you to return to the house after the trying scene you have just gone through. But I must insist. You are not yet fit to travel."

She was so much touched by the kind words, just when her heart was sorest, that she obeyed quite meekly, with a resolve in her mind that no act of hers should prove her undeserving of his gentleness and courtesy, shown at a time when he might have felt some slight resentment against her.

Faithful to her intention, therefore, she kept out of Noel's way for the rest of the day. Mr. Darke would not let her go back to town until after dinner, and then he wanted to send her to the station in the brougham. But she begged him to let her walk.



"And alone," she added, significantly, with a straightforward look into his face.

Mr. Darke understood, and smiled with dignified acknowledgment.

"As you please," said he. "I can trust you to know best, Miss Clevely."

And the grateful tears rushed to her eyes.

The moment she left the dinner-table, therefore, Alison flew to put on her hat and jacket, and, having already gone through a cold leave-taking with the two ladies, she fled out of the house, this time by the front way, and drew a long breath of mingled relief and pain when she found herself once more outside the grounds of Riverscourt.

It was dark, and she did not know the road very well; but it lay between hedges, and was easy to follow, and for a time she hurried on, in a tumult of feeling, with only an occasional shudder at the loneliness of the place, a shudder resulting from her recent experience, for she was not an unduly fanciful or nervous girl.

Before she had gone far, however, she was seized with an uncomfortable feeling that she was being followed. She stopped, she looked round; but when she did so, she could see nothing, hear nothing. She walked on again, and again the consciousness that some one was behind, accommodating each footstep with hers, gripped strongly upon her frightened senses.

She was in a lonely country road, with a high

hedge on one side and a low one on the other, with here and there a tree.

She stepped from the path into the road and once more turned round.

As she did so, with a sharp "ping" something whizzed past her through the air.

With a cry she sprang toward the opposite hedge, forced her way through, ran on and crouched down.

For she knew that what she had heard was a bullet, and that it was intended for her.

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## CHAPTER VI.

As she crouched under the hedge, and waited and listened, Alison heard another shot fired, but this time there was no sound of a bullet whizzing through the air near her, and with a long-drawn breath of relief she felt that for the moment at least she was safe.

Whoever it was that had fired at her, she had escaped danger for the time. She remained motionless, watching keenly, and with her ears straining for the slightest sound. There was a moment's dead silence, and then she heard a cracking of the twigs of the hedge on the opposite side of the road, and, peering through the young

leaves, she dimly saw in the darkness the figure of a man breaking through the hedge.

He was looking for her, and, luckily, he was looking on the wrong side.

She crouched lower, till her body lay on the damp, weedy grass.

When he had got through the hedge the man disappeared for a few seconds from her sight, and she remained, with her heart in her mouth, waiting in dread for the time when he would find out his mistake and cross the road to the side where she was lying hidden.

With every nerve quivering, she waited, scarcely daring to draw breath, until the steady tramp of a man's footsteps approaching made her clench her hands and her teeth with the sick fear that her murderous assailant was close upon her.

She scarcely dared to peep through the hedge as the man's footsteps came nearer. At last she heard him stop, and, half dead with fear, she looked up and saw a man's face peering at her over the low hedge.

She uttered a cry of frantic joy and relief, for it was a policeman.

"Hallo! What's the matter?" said he, as she rose quickly to her feet.

Before she could give any account of what had happened, Alison, now erect, and able to look round, saw distinctly behind the policeman, on the opposite side of the road, a broad-shouldered figure, wearing a peak cap, sharply defined against the faint light in the west.

"There he is!" she cried, pointing with her finger at the man.

But even before the policeman could turn to look the figure had disappeared; and though both Alison and her companion searched carefully, as she made a rapid statement of what had happened, for some sign of his presence, neither saw anything more of him.

Then again there fell upon the unfortunate girl the old sense that she was telling an incredible tale, which had possessed her two evenings before. Hesitatingly, almost tearfully, she told the constable just what she had seen, and repeated her story at the police station, which was not far from the railway for which she was bound.

Luckily, however, for her, the superintendent recognized her as one of the principal witnesses at the inquest that day, and gave her every assistance of respectful sympathy and interest.

"Do you think, miss, that you would be able to recognize the man if you saw him again?" asked he, presently.

"I'm afraid not—I don't think so. I didn't see his face at all. All I could see was that he had broad shoulders, that he wore a peaked cap, and that he either had a beard or a thick muffler round his neck and face," said Alison.

The superintendent looked at an entry in a book near him.

"It seems to have been the same man as young Mr. Darke saw the night before last," said he.

"That's just what I thought!"

"You couldn't say, I suppose, as he was the man who was struggling with the woman by the water's edge?"

"No!" she said, emphatically. "That night, as I said in court, I saw nothing of any person but one—the poor woman as she fell into the water."

"You heard no shots, then?"

"Oh, no."

"And you are quite sure you heard shots to-night?"

"Quite, quite sure."

"Very well, miss. I'll take down your statement. We have your address, and if we can find out anything more you'll hear at once. I'll send a constable with you as far as the station."

"Thank you," said Alison, whose nerves were unstrung by the events of the last three days. "I shall be very, very grateful."

When she was in the train, where she carefully chose a compartment nearly full of other passengers, an inspiration flashed into Alison's mind. For the first few minutes after she had heard the shots she had been in a state of utter mental paralysis, and without an idea on the subject of the outrages that had thus been attempted at such a short interval. Now, a little calmer, she was able to put together the various parts of the whole strange story, as she knew it, and a possible explanation occurred to her. Were not both these wild acts, the murder of the poor kitchen-maid and the attack upon herself, obviously the work of a lunatic? And, taken in conjunction

with Colonel Cressingham's anxiety as to the amount of her own knowledge, was it not probable that he guessed at the identity of the culprit, and that it was some person he knew, perhaps some relation of his own, who had committed both these purposeless and irresponsible crimes?

So reasoned the girl with herself, and by the time she reached London she felt almost sure that this must be the true solution of the mystery.

And then other thoughts crowded out even this matter, for she found herself face to face with the necessity for taking a great resolution.

She loved Noel Darke, and he loved her, and out of her very love there arose the need for her to break off forever all possibility of his meeting her again. She was not such a romantic fool as to think that her love for him could compensate for what he would lose by marriage with her, a penniless typewriter girl, upon whom all his friends would look down. That he was ready to marry her she knew, and the thought filled her with joy and pride; but she had given her word that she would not stand in the way of his interests, and at whatever cost she would keep it loyally.

She would not even risk meeting him again on the way up to the city. So that very night she wrote to the office where she was employed, expressing regret that she was forced to give up her situation; and on the following morning, having just enough money by her to carry out the daring

step, she took train to Manchester with the intention of seeking employment there.

Lancashire was her own native county, but how different was her position now—a lonely girl clerk, one of the crowd of pushing nobodies fighting for a weekly wage—from what it had been when she was Miss Clevely of Clevely Hall, a somebody of somebodies! The bitterness of the fall from poverty with position to poverty without had never been felt by her so keenly as when the train slowed down, through the usual Manchester fog and rain, at Victoria Station.

Sad as these thoughts were, Alison was glad to indulge them, to try to shut out the memory of what she was leaving behind. She called herself romantic; she called herself foolish, childish, mad. But the memory of Noel's handsome, honest eyes, as they looked straight into hers with a passion she dared not encourage, haunted her and filled her heart with a great, aching pain.

She knew enough of Manchester not to be quite at a loss where to turn. In one of the streets off Oxford Road, near All Saints' Church, she found a cheap boarding-house, where she left her luggage, and at once went down to Market Street and entered her name at an employment agency.

She was not unduly confident that her secretarial abilities would soon find her work, for on the very next day she was sent for, tried and engaged by a firm of merchants in Mosely Street at a salary modest, indeed, but sufficient for her wants.

And she worked, worked, was glad to work. But no work, no philosophy, could stop that eternal cry of the heart that haunted her day and night, sleeping and waking, that cry, "Noel! Noel!"

She was lucky, however, in more ways than one. Her commanding beauty gained for her not only admiration but respect. Her modest, quiet manners gained her friends.

In the little boarding-house she was looked upon as a sort of princess in distress, for there was that in her face which betrayed the melancholy feelings at her heart. Even the boarding-house terrors, male and female, forbore to snarl at her. And Mr. Paul Penry, the oldest inhabitant and the autocrat of the house, took her under his particular care.

Paul Penry was a short, thickset, black-eyed man of middle age, with a very thick and fierce black mustache and with thin hair, which was black also, though the boarding-house terrors said it ought to be gray. He was a bookmaker, they said, and the maiden ladies looked askance at him in consequence. His talk was slangy, his views of life were unorthodox; but he was good-natured, and Alison liked him.

He was interested in her from the first, and she was surprised and rather frightened to find how quickly and how cleverly, by a few shrewd questions and comments, he probed to the secrets of her simple life history. She was surprised to find, however, that she did not mind his knowing



them; unconventional as he was, and perhaps cynical, there was about him something which invited her trust. Of course, she did not tell him the particular events which had driven her from London, but he found out that there was a love affair and a mystery at the bottom of her flight.

And before long he knew more than this. It was a daily paper that betrayed her.

"Who's that for, do you think?" said Mr. Penry one morning, thrusting under her eyes a newspaper, and pointing to this line:

"A. C.—I must find you. Write.—N. D."

Alison's face betrayed her. She threw at him one frightened glance, with eyes swimming in tears, and there was no need for any other answer.

"There, there, don't cry; I won't say a word," said Mr. Penry, good-humoredly. "But he'll find you, sure enough."

Alison stared at him in consternation.

"What do you mean? How do you know?"

"Oh, my dear child, I know nothing except this—that when a man is sweet upon such a pretty girl as you are he's sure to find her out, sooner or later, that's all. Hope he's a nice chap, a good chap, and that—it's all right, all square, eh?"

Alison could not resent the inquiries of the man whom she felt to be her friend. He went on:

"You needn't mind an old chap like me! I've got a daughter older than you are, and married and settled. And I should like to see you married and settled, too, that I should."

"Thank you," said Alison, quite gratefully. "It's good of you to say so, but—it will never happen, never!"

"Oh, come, never's a long day," said Mr. Penry, as he rose to go.

From that moment these two oddly assorted people felt that there was a sort of bond of friendship between them, so that it was with no surprise and no displeasure that Alison, some days later, found Mr. Penry whispering confidentially in her ear:

"I think he *has* found you, Miss C."

Alison started and looked alarmed.

"What do you mean?"

"You notice when you go out to-morrow whether you're followed."

Remembering her solitary experience of that sort, Alison uttered a suppressed scream.

"There, there, don't be frightened. P'r'aps I'm wrong. But just look out for a thin, seedy-looking fellow with light clothes and a bit of a sandy mustache."

Alison could not answer. The memory of what she had been through so recently returned upon her with overwhelming force now that she saw herself confronted with further unknown dangers. Who was it that was now dogging her footsteps? Not any one on Noel's behalf, she was

sure. Those were not the methods he would use to find her.

It was with a sick sense of dread that she went out to her daily task on the following morning, on the alert for the man of whom Mr. Penry had spoken. And before the day was over she knew that he was right; the seedy-looking man with the sandy mustache had followed her to the office and followed her back again—she was watched.

At first she thought of running away again, whither she did not know. But second thoughts showed her that flight was useless, since she could always be traced. And it was better to remain in the place where she had employment and where she had made a friend.

On the following day she looked out keenly for the seedy-looking man, but she never saw him again; and she soon began to look upon the adventure as unimportant.

In the meantime she had made a new friend in the person of a little, fair-haired, well-bred man named Jarvis, who was a new boarder, and who showed the attraction the handsome typewriter girl had for him at once in a dozen unobtrusive ways.

The other boarders began to jest about Mr. Jarvis and his overwhelming, but shy, admiration for the beauty, and Mr. Penry in particular was never tired of teasing Alison quietly about her "conquest."

It was one Sunday evening, when Alison had almost forgotten her fright about being followed

and watched, that Mr. Penry reminded her suddenly of the fact.

Alison, who had been pretending to read in order that she might brood quietly over her secret griefs, started and grew red.

"Why do you talk about that?" she asked, in a frightened whisper. "Have you seen the man again?"

"No, no," said he. "Don't be alarmed. I never saw him after that day. But—you mustn't think me impertinent—I'm curious to know why you should have been so much alarmed by my suggestion. I believe—mind, you needn't answer if you think it's just my cheek—you have had some great fright lately, some terrible fright!"

And he looked with his piercing black eyes straight into her face.

She hesitated for a moment, and then answered quite frankly:

"It is quite true. You are a clever man, Mr. Penry. I have a good mind to tell you about it."

He looked her straightforwardly in the eyes.

"If I can help you in any way I will," he said, simply.

For answer she gave him an outline of the strange events that had happened at Riverscourt on her visit there, carefully suppressing all names, but going into details closely, which she thought was her only chance of enlisting Mr. Penry's acuteness and skill in the mystery. But she forgot one thing—the inquest on the dead girl

had been reported in the papers. He nodded at the end of her narrative.

"I know—Riverscourt—Mr. Josiah Darke's place on the river," said he.

Alison grew white to the lips.

"Don't worry," said he. "Now I know so much, tell me the rest. Names, too, please."

She hesitated and then obeyed. What else could she do?

When she came to the name of Colonel Cressingham Mr. Penry made a slight movement of the eyebrows; he asked one or two questions about him, and then slapped his knee and said:

"That's the chap that's at the bottom of it!"

"Ah!" said Alison. "I thought so, too; but he couldn't have been the man who murdered the girl, and he couldn't have been the man who shot at me. He was in the dining-room with the other gentlemen while the girl was killed; and I *saw* the man who shot at me, and I could swear it was not the Colonel!"

"Doesn't matter a pin! I say he's at the bottom of the mystery," repeated Mr. Penry, strongly. "Look here, I'll tell you a bit of a secret. Before I took to my present line of business I did some work for a private inquiry agent, and one of the things I had to do was to try to bring this very Colonel Cressingham to book. A bad case—robbing a young man of family, a minor, at cards. But he was too fly for me, for any of us. The fellow's a gentleman by birth, but his family won't have anything to do with him.

He's a thorough-paced scoundrel, and if Mr. Darke, who's by way of being a bit of a swell and related to grand families—if he was to know who and what Cressingham is—he'd turn him out neck and crop and never let him darken his doors again!"

Alison rose to her feet, trembling and cold.

"Are you sure of this?" she said.

"Absolutely certain sure. Cressingham's a downright dangerous man, and the Darkes wouldn't have him in their house if they knew a quarter as much about him as I do!"

The girl was staring out before her, white, faint, irresolute.

If this were true, Noel—*Noel* might be in danger. A sense of the ugly mystery that hung over Riverscourt began to gather over her again; she held her breath and tried to think.

What ought she to do? Ought she not to warn them of the danger they had in their midst, of the character of the man whom they received as an intimate friend?

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## CHAPTER VII.

MR. PENRY looked narrowly at Alison while these thoughts chased each other through her mind. He was a shrewd man, and her face was easy to read. A faint smile curved the corners of his mouth as he said:

"How many sons did you say Mr. Darke had?"

The convulsive movement and the blush which were her first answer to this satisfied him on the point he had in his mind. After a moment's hesitation she said:

"I think there are three. At least, I've seen three, and I don't think there are any more."

"And which of the three is the nicest?" asked Mr. Penry, drily.

By this time, of course, Alison knew that he had guessed her poor little secret, at least to the extent of knowing that the person who had inserted the advertisement which betrayed her was one of Mr. Darke's sons. Recognizing that she was found out, and that it could not be helped, she said, gravely, without looking up:

"The nicest of the three is Mr. Noel Darke, the second son. The eldest, Mr. Swithin, is not nice at all. I think he drinks, and I'm not quite sure that—that he is of quite the average intelligence. He's very unpopular even in his family, and the friends staying at the house, Colonel Cressingham and Captain Lansdell, both dislike him, too. If I had not known absolutely that he was in the house at the time the poor girl was drowned, I should have thought he had had a hand in this terrible business. They all would have thought so, I think. Indeed, a lady who called at the house had the audacity to suggest it to Mrs. Darke!"

"Cheek!" said Mr. Penry, briefly. "And what's the third son like?"

"Oh, Peverell's only a boy of fourteen or so."

Mr. Penry looked at her slyly out of the corners of his eyes.

"And I suppose I'm not far wrong in thinking that Mr. Noel Darke is the 'N. D.' of the advertisement in the papers?"

Alison bowed her head silently.

"Then all I can say is that you've done a very sensible thing in coming away. I suppose this young fellow fell head over ears in love with you—and small blame to him—and that you, like a sensible girl, wouldn't have anything to say to him."

It was with a feeling akin to consternation that the girl thus heard her poor little secret laid bare. White and faltering, she said:

"Oh, hush! How could you guess all that?"

"Why, because I know what a high-spirited young lady you are, to be sure," said Mr. Penry.

"But you don't know the sort of man he is," said Alison, earnestly. "Although they all wanted him to marry an earl's daughter, who was in love with him, he would have braved everything and married me. Now you can see that I have a right to be proud of the liking of such a man."

"Yes, and he has a right to be proud of the liking of such a girl as you," retorted Mr. Penry, cheerily; "for you've done the best thing for you both in coming away—sort of hiding yourself, eh?"

Alison paused a moment.

"It wasn't all magnanimity on my part that



made me decide to leave London," she said, soberly. "You see, I was shot at, deliberately shot at, and whether it was by a lunatic or not, a thing like that doesn't make one exactly anxious to remain in the neighborhood."

Mr. Penry began pulling his mustache, first the one end and then the other, frowning hard all the time.

"Rum thing altogether!" he said at last, briefly. And then, after another pause, he looked at her again, and was touched by the sad expression of her great eyes. "There, there, cheer up," he said, kindly. "You've gone through a rough time, and it's hard to have to give up a nice young fellow like that, no doubt. But, after all, you couldn't have been very comfortable if he had carried the thing through in spite of them all, now, could you?"

"Oh! no, no, of course not."

"While there are as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it. A girl as handsome as you are has more trouble in keeping them off than in getting 'em to come on! Why, here's our friend Jarvis green with melancholy if you look at anybody else!"

They both laughed, for little Mr. Jarvis, with his gentle, slightly effeminate manner and precise speech, had made himself so conspicuous by his devotion that he had already become a jest.

"Oh, Mr. Jarvis isn't the same," said Alison, decidedly.

"Of course he isn't the same, and of course

nobody would be the same just now. But wait, wait a little. Don't give way to low spirits; don't worry your head about what's happened; look upon the shooting as the work of a lunatic, as probably it was; and, above all, persevere in your behavior as regards this young Mr. Darke."

And with these words Mr. Penry rose, smiled and nodded at her kindly, and returned to his sheaf of sporting papers in the corner.

Alison, though she had scarcely got over her consternation at the extent to which he had obtained her confidence, was on the whole comforted by the encouragement and approval of the shrewd and kindly bookmaker. And she felt quite sorry when, on the following morning, as she came down to breakfast, she met him at the foot of the stairs with his overcoat and his hat and portmanteau in one hand, and he held out the other, and said:

"Just waited to say good-bye. Shan't see you for a day or two. I'm going up to town. Any commissions for you at Tattersall's?"

But if Alison was sorry at Mr. Penry's departure, her feeling was not universally shared. The elderly ladies, without whom no boarding-house is complete, were quite relieved at even the temporary absence of this loud-voiced, brusque-mannered person who had so little reverence for their gentility. And poor Mr. Jarvis, who had perhaps felt some jealousy of Mr. Penry on account of his longer acquaintance with Alison, openly rejoiced at his going.

"I'm so glad that man's gone!" he said, when he and Alison met at dinner-time that evening. "He was so coarse, so aggressive. I couldn't bear him!"

"Oh, don't say that. He was my great friend," said Alison.

"I can't think why you call him that," said Mr. Jarvis, apparently rather hurt, "unless you were attracted by the rule of contraries. Anything more absurd than the contrast between your refinement and his want of it I never saw."

"He was very kind to me," said Alison; "very kind, indeed."

"I can't admit that," said Mr. Jarvis, in his precise little voice. "There's no kindness in paying attention to you. We're all dying to do anything we can to show what we feel for you."

Poor Mr. Jarvis stammered out these words with a blush and a nervous movement of his hands, which were as white and as delicate as those of a woman. "If there is anything that I could do, for instance, why, I should be only too glad, only too overjoyed."

While Alison laughed at him, she was too nice a girl not to be touched by this shy devotion. And as the days went on, and Mrs. Jarvis' attentions, always unobtrusive, always shyly given, continued, she became grateful in a way, especially as he never obtruded himself, never showed the least excitement, the least vehemence. Kind, quiet, calm, the devotion of the little man with the smooth, fair hair and the smiling face, was

neither aggressive nor exacting; and when, by brooding over her lost romance, Alison began to grow listless and almost ill, Mr. Jarvis watched her more closely than ever, while obtruding as little as before.

One Sunday evening, when he had accompanied her to church and they were returning to the boarding-house, she, in a sort of restless silence, which he dared not interrupt, cried out suddenly:

"How hatefully monotonous this life in England is! I should like to go away somewhere, right away—to the end of the world!"

"You'd have to come back again, some day, you know!" suggested Mr. Jarvis' gentle, chirping little voice.

"Oh, yes, of course. Life resolves itself into routine everywhere, I know. But it would be nice to get a break, a sharp, vivid break, and then one could reconcile one's self to dropping down again into type—type—typing afterward."

Mr. Jarvis laughed gently, looked at her askance, but at the time made no further comment.

Two days later, however, he glided into the chair next to her, which, indeed, he now always occupied when he could, and said, in a voice scarcely above a whisper:

"Miss Clevely, I'm going to Australia. Do you think you could make up your mind to the vivid break and come, too?"

Startlingly sudden as this proposal would have been on the lips of any other man, Mr.

Jarvis was such a harmless, inoffensive little fellow that on his it became merely amusing. She did not snub him; she only laughed gently and told him it was impossible. He took her refusal quite cheerfully, much, indeed, as he would have taken a refusal to eat mustard or marmalade.

But he did not give up the point; day after day, whenever he saw an opportunity, steadily, unobtrusively, he urged his suit, never wearying her with passionate or even sentimental outbursts, which would have repelled or wearied her, but suggesting her marriage with him as a means ready to hand of getting her the relief and change she wanted.

"I can't understand you," she said to him one day, suddenly, when, in his usual smiling manner, he had, for the twentieth time, brought his suit to her notice. "You don't appear to have any violent affection for me; I can scarcely believe that my presence or absence moves you more than if I were a spaniel. And yet, day after day, in season and out of season, you amuse yourself with these preposterous proposals. I can't think why you do it."

"Can't you? Nobody else finds any difficulty in understanding it," smiled Mr. Jarvis, cheerfully.

"Oh, I don't mean," said Alison, "that I can't understand that anybody should ever want to marry me. I'm not so modest as that. But I mean that I can't understand why you should."

You are so very matter-of-fact, so very cool and quiet, and yet——”

“And yet determined?” suggested he. “Well, you know the proverb, ‘Fair and softly goes far in a day.’ I’m going fair, and I’m going softly, and I hope some day to go as far as—you.”

Alison only laughed at him, but she did not attempt to check a devotion which seemed so harmless to its subject, while not disagreeable to its object. Mr. Jarvis went on with his proposals, and, of course, the day came when, ill, miserable, worn out with brooding, in a fit of despair Alison promised to marry him.

At least, she told herself, it would put an insurmountable bar between herself and Noel Darke. And, weakening under the strain of constant misery, constant longing, she had begun to feel that some such bar was necessary; otherwise, when the inevitable moment should come of her meeting Noel again, she feared that she would be too weak to withstand his prayers, as for his sake she must do.

Sydney Jarvis took her acceptance as quietly, as cheerfully as he had taken her refusals. With minds quite unclouded with passion they were able to discuss their arrangements, and Alison was almost bewildered that night, when she thought over what she had done, to find how she seemed to have slipped suddenly into an engagement with a man whom she liked, indeed, but whom she certainly did not love.

It was the fate of most women, she told herself

with a sigh, when they had had one heart-breaking experience of love, to do without it thenceforth. And, uneasy, dispirited, with the tears wet on her cheeks, she fell asleep that night.

They took no one into their confidence except Mrs. Neave, the landlady, a dull-eyed, worried woman, who thought love less interesting than legs of mutton, and who seemed to be eternally calculating, between her slightly moving lips, how many pounds of sugar could be got "to do" the week between so many boarders. Broken hearts were to her of less account than broken tea-cups, and in the moving tale they told her of a quiet wedding and prompt departure for Australia she saw nothing more romantic or stirring than the loss of two lodgers.

It struck Alison, who remained throughout the preparations strangely listless and unmoved, as remarkable that neither she nor Sydney Jarvis thought of making any elaborate preparations for the long journey. He assured her, indeed, having been to Melbourne before, that it was absurd to look upon that town as being outside the pale of civilization.

"You will find even typewriters there," said he, "and all the other products of an advanced state of culture."

According to his own account, he was almost as much alone in the world as she was herself, though he was not quite so poor. So they had no troops of friends to bid to the wedding,

which took place very early one morning in a church some distance from Mrs. Neave's house.

Alison was married in her walking dress, one Friday morning, to the great horror of Mrs. Neave, who told her she could expect no luck if she allowed such a thing. But as the ship by which the happy pair were to sail for Melbourne left Plymouth on the Saturday, they snapped their fingers at Fate and the landlady, and stole into a cold church one May morning, where a sleepy clergyman read the marriage service in the presence of a sonorous clerk and of a friend of Sydney Jarvis' from the boarding-house.

"It's not exactly a 'smart' affair, is it?" said Sydney Jarvis, as he led his bride out of the dark church into the gray light of the cloudy morning.

The friend who had acted as witness to the ceremony had already left them to go to the office at which he was a clerk, and they suddenly realized in an odd way that they were alone together in the world, man and wife, knowing still not very much of each other, and with a long, long voyage before them. At least, that was what Alison realized, and looking down—for she was taller than he—into Sydney Jarvis' face, she thought he must be thinking so, too.

For he was nervous, restless, uneasy, laughing without reason at trifles, and looking cold and grey about the shadows of his face.

Alison felt rather guilty; she felt that she, going through the service like an automaton,



might well have made him repent his bargain even at this early stage.

"Well, we might have had more carriages, and—and more bouquets and things," she assented, trying to speak cheerfully and to smile as she answered.

"We'll—we'll make up for it by-and-by," said Sydney, looking round him vaguely. "When we get to Melbourne we'll make our fortune in no time. You'll see."

"Yes," said Alison, just as vaguely. "And what are we going to do now?"

"Well, I've got to go down into the town to fetch my luggage," said he. "Where's yours?"

"I took it to the station last night and left it at the luggage office, to save trouble," said Alison, who had been anxious to avoid curious eyes, now that the story of the wedding must have got about.

Sydney looked at his watch. His hand was trembling.

"I shan't be an hour," said he. "Let me see. I'd better take you to 'The White Bear,' and you can have something to eat while I'm gone. You had no breakfast."

"You need not take me there. I'll walk," said she; "it will fill up the time."

He had hailed one of the little square Manchester hansoms, and was offering his hand to help her in.

But she drew back, smilingly nodded good-bye, and walked on, leaving him to take the hansom by

himself. She had a sort of feeling already that she was sorry for what she had done; she began to understand that she had let herself be hurried into taking a step which needed more thought than she had given to it. And, her eyes opening with startling suddenness to the truth, she realized that she did not like Sydney Jarvis as much as she had thought she did.

However, she had taken the irrevocable step now, and at least she had fulfilled one duty—she had cut herself off finally and fully from Noel Darke.

She felt that she ought to be glad; but she was not, oh, she was not!

She knew "The White Bear," the little, quiet hotel near the infirmary, very well, having been taken there to tea by Sydney more than once during their brief courtship. When she got there she went upstairs to the coffee-room, sat down by the window and watched the hurrying passers-by of the early morning with dull eyes.

She felt half-stupid and as if in a dream. Where was she going? What was this life upon which she was entering so blindly?

She ordered a cup of tea, and sat a long time sipping it and crumbling a biscuit idly. At last she began to wonder what was keeping Sydney away so long. An hour became two hours, and she had been downstairs to the door half a dozen times to look out for him, when the waiter brought a note directed to "Mrs. S. Jarvis,"

which he said had just been brought by a messenger, who had gone away.

Opening it with a sudden sick feeling of impending disaster, she read this note in pencil:

“What an inauspicious beginning! Read the enclosed telegram. I am obliged to start at once. Go back to Mrs. Neave’s, where I will write or wire to you to-night. With all love and devotion.  
“S. J.”

Enclosed was a telegram in the envelope in which it had reached Mrs. Neave’s; it was as follows:

“Sister dying. Come at once.—JARVIS.”

Alison looked at the telegram and shivered a little. To be left alone, quite alone, in the world on her wedding morning was a strange, a dismal thing. Yet she could not feel that she cared.

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## CHAPTER VIII.

ALISON stood undecided for little more than a minute; then she put the telegram back into its envelope and carefully consigned it with the note to her pocket.

In the midst of her bewilderment at this unexpected turn of events she was conscious that, on the whole, she was rather pleased than otherwise at the unexpected disappearance of her newly made husband, and that the dread she had begun to feel at the thought of the long voyage to a strange country at once gave place to a feeling of elasticity, of satisfaction in the knowledge that, for a time at least, she was her own mistress still.

Sydney had said in his note that she was to go back to Mrs. Neave's, and that he would communicate with her there. But this command or advice she promptly resolved to disregard. She could not face all the curious eyes in the boarding-house, could not answer all the questions, run the gauntlet of malicious suggestion or effusive condolence.

No, she would go back to London. Lancashire was no longer her home, and the charm of the unknown, unknowable, never-to-be-fully-known metropolis began to draw her once more toward it at this crisis of her fortunes.

So she paid for her tea and biscuits and started for the station on foot, eager for the movement, for something to do, in the restless state into which she had been thrown by the sudden news.

She had not, however, gone a hundred yards when a well-known voice greeted her with:

"Hallo! What brings you out here at this time of day?"

Turning quickly, with a heightened color and

a shamefaced look, Alison found herself face to face with Mr. Penry. He had his little portmanteau in his hand and his overcoat on his arm, as if he had just returned from a journey.

The girl hesitated, and he looked her penetratingly in the face.

"Something wrong, eh?" said he, kindly.

"I've got married," she replied, simply.

Mr. Penry whistled softly and looked concerned.

"Who to? Not—Jarvis?"

"Yes."

"Why did you do it?"

"Well, why shouldn't I? He seemed to want me to, and nobody else seemed to want me to do anything."

Mr. Jarvis was frowning.

"Oh, he may be all right. A nice little chap enough, rather 'Miss Nancy,' perhaps, but good-natured and apparently very devoted to you. I only thought you might have waited till you knew a little more about him. However, what's done can't be undone. Where are you staying? Not at Mrs. Neave's?"

"He left there yesterday, and I this morning. We were married two hours ago, and he's gone away already."

In a very quiet and matter-of-fact manner she handed to him the note and the telegram. Mr. Penry read both through without moving a muscle of his face, and then said, briefly:

"This is all wrong. May I keep these?"

Alison began to look frightened.

"I wish I hadn't shown them to you," she said. "I don't see why the telegram shouldn't be genuine. Why should he have married me if he didn't want to? Please give me back the note."

"Better let me keep them," said he, persuasively. "I promise not to make any use of them without your permission. Look here, you're only a bit of a girl, and I'm a man of fifty, who has seen the world. You may bet your life if I think a thing looks fishy there's something in it."

"But why——"

"Ah! Why? That's more than I can tell you. But it's what I'll try and find out—what I will find out, if you'll let me. Now, what are you going to do? Going back to the boarding-house?"

"Of course not. I'm going back to London."

"Better not. You might run against young Darke."

Alison interrupted him sharply.

"That's not at all likely, and it wouldn't matter if I did *now*."

Mr. Penry's expression was as kind as it was keen as he said, earnestly:

"Then why not keep away from London? You have friends up here in Lancashire, haven't you?"

She drew herself up.

"I should certainly not go back to them after what I've just done. Ask yourself whether it's possible. No, I'm going to London, and I'm not going to leave any address at Mrs. Neave's for

Sydney to find me by. If he wants me he can look for me."

Mr. Penry nodded.

"Right," said he. "At the same time, it would be as well to come to an understanding. He ought to be brought to book."

"Perhaps I shall come across him in London," remarked Alison, after a pause, without any eagerness. "One meets most people in London."

"Except the people one wants to meet," retorted Mr. Penry. "However, you must gang your own gait, I suppose. I'll give you an address in London where you can write, if at any time I can be of use to you. It's not a swell address, but it'll find me."

And he wrote on an envelope an address in Kennington Road and handed it to her, ignoring her request for her own papers. Then he accompanied her to the London Road Station, and saw her off by the train that started at ten minutes past two.

She felt her spirits rising as soon as the train began to move. Conscious, in spite of her brave words to Mr. Penry, that she had committed a grave imprudence in her marriage with a man of whom she knew but little, she did not believe for a moment that the grave words of condemnation and of warning which she had just heard were justified. Even if she did not love Sydney Jarvis as she would have loved the husband of her heart's choice, she liked him, and felt absolutely sure that he was incapable of the purposeless vil-

lainy of marrying a woman just for the sake of abandoning her at the very church door.

Although, therefore, her spirit rose at the manner in which he had treated her, and she felt that he ought, at all hazards, to have met her and explained the situation by word of mouth instead of by sending a note, she was sure that the telegram he had received was a genuine one, and that he would be overwhelmed with consternation and dismay when he found that she had not returned to Mrs. Neave's.

And then a new thought struck her. Had he realized that he was abandoning not only his wife, but at least part of the passage-money for the journey to Australia? They had booked their berths by the steamer which was to leave Plymouth on the following day, and for them to start at the appointed time was now impossible.

Sydney Jarvis, although apparently not poor, was a careful little man, and it must be a matter of great urgency which would cause him to throw money away.

Who was this sister referred to in the telegram? Alison had always thought he had no near relations. But then she remembered that the confidences they had exchanged had been singularly few. She, for instance, on her side, had never even mentioned to him her acquaintance with the Darkes and the tragic experience which had resulted from it. And she had not shown any particular curiosity concerning his family,



so that it was possible that he had spoken about a sister, but that she had forgotten the fact.

On the whole, the circumstances were unusual enough to make her uneasy, though not unduly suspicious. The most surprising part of the matter was the contrast which his sudden resolve to go to town at once presented to Sydney's usual caution and carefulness.

Long before she reached Euston she had made up her mind what to do. One of her fellow-clerks lived in Finborough Road, where her mother kept a small boarding-house, and to that dreary thoroughfare Alison drove with her luggage without delay. As she had expected, she not only got installed at once, but she heard some news of Noel Darke.

Minnie Baring, who had been employed at the same typewriting office, said to her that very evening:

"Oh, by-the-by, Miss Clevely, you remember the gentleman who came to the office the last day you were there to ask you to go down to his father's place? At least, of course, you remember him, for there was that horrid murder, or whatever it was, down there the same day, and I remember your name was among the witnesses."

"Yes, I remember him, a Mr. Darke," said Alison, very quietly.

"Well, he's been at the office again and again with letters to copy. And we girls used to wonder," and she looked slyly at Alison, "why he

came, until he asked point-blank what had become of Miss Clevely. And when he was told that you had left the office and that nobody knew your address he seemed most awfully disappointed. So I suppose, demure as you are, you have your little human weaknesses like the rest of us."

"What do you mean?" asked Alison, looking her steadily in the face.

Minnie Baring laughed a little.

"Oh, don't look so solemn. I only meant that Mr. Darke gave me the impression that he was very much interested in you, more interested than such a very handsome man would have been in any girl who took no interest in him."

"It was natural that he should be interested," said Alison, "for, as you know, I was down at his father's place at a very exciting time. On the other hand, I am anxious myself not to be brought in contact with any of the family again, for the whole experience was very trying to me, very trying, indeed."

She spoke so simply, so earnestly, that Minnie Baring was touched as well as interested, and readily gave her the required promise that she would not give her address to Noel Darke if she should meet him again.

"I have the very strongest reasons," Alison said, "for not wishing him to find me out, and I'm not going back to the typewriting office again on purpose to avoid the Darke family."

She was so straightforward that she enlisted

Minnie's sympathies completely; and, indeed, the circumstances connected with her visit to Rivers-court explained her feeling sufficiently.

On the following day she went to look for employment in a different direction, and succeeded in establishing herself in an office in the neighborhood of Fleet Street, where she had been working uninterruptedly for some days without incident when a startling experience befell her.

She had been working late at the office, and was coming at a leisurely pace along the Strand when the great heat of the July day was over. Change of scene had already had a salutary effect on her, and she was feeling that pleasant sense of rest after labor which is like balm to an agitated heart, when all her troubles were suddenly brought back to her mind by the sight of a figure in whom she thought she recognized her husband, Sydney Jarvis.

Husband! She had not used that word in connection with him, even with herself, except in mockery. She had, indeed, deliberately tried to forget his existence, telling herself that it would be soon enough to remember him when he appeared to remember her. Now, however, the sight of him woke her with a sense of alarm to the fact that she was a legally married wife, and that she might at any time find herself face to face with legal obligations. And she was shocked to find that the thought filled her with alarm and distress, so that her first instinct was not to meet Sydney, but to avoid him.

And that is probably what she would have done if she had not abruptly awoke to the belief that he on his side was avoiding her.

He was on the other side of the road, of the busy, bustling Strand, and, although there was the usual amount of traffic going on, she was almost sure she recognized his gait as well as his figure. On the other hand, she had never before seen him in an overcoat or in a hat of the shape of the one he was wearing. Moreover, his face was partly concealed by a silk muffler. As the evening was warm, and as Sydney had always laughed at the wearing even of an overcoat, it occurred to her to wonder whether the long black coat and muffler and unaccustomed hat were assumed for purposes of disguise. And when he looked round, caught or appeared to catch her eye, and immediately hurried on at an increased pace, it is no wonder that her surprise grew into suspicion and that she at once resolved to follow him.

Now, Alison Clevely—for she still used nothing but her maiden name—was by this time a Londoner, used to London streets, clever and self-reliant. She therefore had little difficulty in keeping in view the man she was following, while at the same time maintaining an appearance of calmness and indifference. She did not hurry her pace; she did not turn her head or her eyes anxiously in his direction, but, watching and following, without appearing to do either, she presently saw the little man in the long overcoat and

the black, round hat turn into a street off the Strand and disappear through a doorway on the right.

Alison was some distance away, but she now hurried her steps and found the shop into which he had disappeared. It was that of a well-known dealer in curiosities and works of art, at whose window she had often passed an admiring five minutes. She now stopped to look in with more than usual interest, and, standing in the recessed doorway, she was able to get a full view, not, indeed, of the face of the man she had followed, but of his figure, as he stood inside the shop, holding in his hand, for the inspection of the dealer himself, a snuff-box so beautiful that Alison, interested as she was in the man, had to bestow an admiring second glance upon what he held.

For the exquisitely enameled lid was embellished with two miniatures, each set in a circle of diamonds and surmounted by a diamond crown.

The dealer was facing Alison as he took the proffered box, and he glanced up at her through the glass casually as he held out his hand.

The other man half turned, and immediately retreated further into the shop.

Alison's heart seemed to leap up.

She was now almost sure that this man was indeed Sydney Jarvis, although she had by this time noticed that he wore a slight, fair mustache, whereas she had always known Sydney clean-shaved.

Drawing back from the doorway, she waited for him to come out, and she took care to keep out of sight of the shop windows.

But she waited an hour—an hour and a half; she waited until the shop was shut for the night. But nobody had come out, and she began to be sure of two things: the first was that the man she had seen was really Sydney Jarvis, the man who had married her, and the second was that she had been tricked.

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## CHAPTER IX.

YES! There could be no doubt about it. Sydney Jarvis it was whom Alison had seen in the shop of the curiosity dealer; and on seeing the woman he had married he had beaten a retreat by the back way.

These were the facts which Alison had to face, and which she did face bravely as she made her way back to Finborough Road.

She had, indeed, for a moment entertained the idea of going into the shop and asking whether Mr. Jarvis lived there. But she felt too sure that he did not, that he had been a customer merely, not a resident in the house, to spoil her chances by such a question.

If her heart had been deeply engaged, she would probably have spent the night in tears at

the thought of the cruel and apparently senseless trick which had been played upon her. But as her consent to marry Sydney had been given rather in pity and in weariness than in love, the startling events which had succeeded her rash marriage bewildered rather than saddened her, and served rather as a stimulus to action than a cause of prostration or of grief.

She went through her work on the following day with nerves as steady as ever, and in the evening she walked down the Strand and presented herself at the shop of the dealer in curiosities with a little, old-fashioned brooch in her hand.

This brooch was an "antique," indeed, having belonged to Alison's grandmother; but it was of very trifling value, and if it had not been, the girl had no intention of parting with it. The offer of it for sale, however, formed an excellent introduction, and it was with a well-acted appearance of disappointment that she received the dealer's half-civil, half-contemptuous assurance that he could make her no offer for it.

"But it's really old," persisted Alison, looking down at the little cameo in its frame of pale gold.

"Oh, yes, it's old, I know; but, my dear young lady, there are thousands of similar brooches about, so that it's neither old enough nor curious enough to be worth much. You might get a few shillings for it from some man who deals in these small things, but I don't buy anything of that kind or of that class."

"You were buying a thing not much bigger than that, a snuff-box, from Mr. Sydney Jarvis last night," said Alison, springing the words upon him suddenly, and at the same time meeting his eyes with a challenging look.

For a moment he looked surprised. Then a contemptuous smile came over his face.

"I bought a snuff-box last night, certainly," he said, with polite sarcasm in his tone. "And it's true it was not so very much bigger than your brooch, madam. But it was not an article worth a few shillings, as you may guess when I tell you that the price I paid for it was eighteen hundred pounds."

"Eighteen—hundred—pounds!" gasped Alison, stupefied, not only by the amount, but by the questions to which the point gave rise in her mind. "You gave Mr. Jarvis eighteen hundred pounds for it?"

The dealer stared at her, and slowly shook his head.

"I don't know anything about any Mr. Jarvis," said he. "One doesn't buy things of that value from casual customers, you know. A snuff-box that's worth eighteen hundred pounds to a man like me must have a pedigree."

Alison hesitated.

"May I ask, then, of whom it was you bought the snuff-box?" she asked, quietly.

He looked at her and considered a moment.

"Oh, yes, madam, I've no objection to tell you that," said he. "I bought it of a gentleman who



is himself a curio-hunter, and to whom I've sold a good many things, and from whom I've bought a good many; his name is Jerdan."

In an instant there leaped to Alison's mind the fact that Jerdan was a name of the same initial as Jarvis. She probed a little further, but even as she did so she guessed what the result would be.

"And do you know where he lives?" she asked.

"No, madam, I can't tell you that," was the prompt and expected reply.

And, obliged to be content with the information she had obtained, Alison thanked him and went out of the shop.

She was more bewildered than ever. If she had wanted further proof of the fact her own eyes had taught her, that it was Sydney Jarvis, the man who had married her, whom she had seen in the shop of the curiosity dealer, she had it now. For she remembered that Sydney had said he was by profession an "agent," and Alison had never asked him for a closer definition of that vague term, but had supposed that, having a little money of his own, he called himself an "agent" as another idle man calls himself a "barrister," more to give a colorable imitation of industry to his doings than with any ardent desire to work hard.

In view of his treatment of herself, however, there now arose the question whether his calling of "agent" was entirely an honest one. It seemed clear that he either exercised it under a feigned

name, or that he had married her in a name that was not really his own. Alison began to ask herself finally whether she was really married to him at all.

And the answer she was inclined to give to this last question was in the negative.

In the meantime his conduct in going through the ceremony of marriage with her became more and more inexplicable, and, indeed, assumed in Alison's eyes such a strong appearance of being a senseless and purposeless fraud that she began to wonder whether the man who had married her was altogether responsible for his actions, and whether the serene calmness and coolness which she had taken as a sign that he was a man of sound judgment and determination, one on whom she could rely, was in reality nothing but the callous serenity of mental deficiency.

Had she married a lunatic?

If she had known a solicitor in whom she could place confidence, Alison would have gone to him at once in her difficulty, would have placed the circumstances before him and asked him what course she ought to pursue.

Or if she had had such a friend as Mr. Penry at hand, she would have asked him to take her to his solicitor about the matter. This course, indeed, she held in reserve, having the Kennington address carefully in her possession. In the meantime she felt such a distinct loss of responsibility in the matter of her marriage that she no

longer felt herself to be under any tie, and, having written to Mrs. Neave and learned in reply that no letters had been received for her at the Manchester boarding-house, she heaved a sigh of relief, and told herself that, whatever might have been Sydney Jarvis' reason for marrying her, the ceremony, in view of his subsequent conduct, could not be binding.

Whether it was that the sense of ill-usage made her feel reckless, or whether it was some sentiment less easily defined that led her in the direction of the Mansion House one Saturday about midday, it is impossible to say; but Minnie Baring, on leaving the typewriting office and going down Cornhill toward the Underground Station, was surprised to come face to face with Alison.

"Why, Miss Clevely!" cried she, "what are you doing here? I thought you never came near the City now!"

Alison reddened.

"I'm not quite sure," she answered, trying to smile, "that I know why I came this way. But it's a change from Fleet Street, and I think I wanted to see some of the old faces."

Minnie Baring laughed rather maliciously and glanced across the road toward the broad pavement in front of the Exchange. Alison's eyes followed the direction of hers, and saw—well, she supposed it was indeed the person she had wanted to see; for, crossing toward them at a rapid pace, with a preoccupied air, was Noel Darke.

"I dare say I should be *de trop*, so ta-ta!" said Minnie, drily.

And she nodded and went toward the station just at the moment that Noel, crossing the road, became conscious that he was face to face with Alison.

He looked up, and his expression changed. Every trace of color left his cheeks, and he reached the pavement with a face like that of a dead man. Then for one instant he hesitated, and Alison, standing silent and still a few paces from him, not daring to smile or to invite speech by so much as a look, waited in deadly anxiety for his next action.

Abruptly, after one look at her face, he turned away and walked rapidly up Cornhill and away from her.

Then she realized all that her disappearance had meant to him, and realized, too, the danger to them both there was in this fresh meeting.

Coming this way that morning with the half-defined wish in her heart that she might meet Noel, the man whom she could trust, and that she might get from him the address of his father's solicitor, so that she might at once get sound advice in the matter of her rash marriage, she now woke up with a sudden vivid pang to the knowledge that this was impossible. To awake fresh his interest in herself by telling him her strange story would be to throw both herself and him into a position of peril and to undo all the

good done by her conscientious withdrawal of herself from his world.

But why, oh, why did he look at her as if she had done him a great wrong? Was this the reward of her self-denial, of her self-effacement?

The tears rose to her eyes as she turned away and, almost tottering, moved slowly in the direction of the subway to the station.

She had not gone many steps before she felt a hand thrust under her arm, and heard Noel's voice saying, half-tenderly, half-resentfully:

"You are ill, aren't you? Let me help you down."

She shivered at his touch, turned, faltered, and looked up.

His face was still pale, his mouth still quivered, and his eyes did not meet hers.

"No. I'm quite well, thank you. But—but—the heat——"

"Yes. It's very warm to-day—Mrs. Jarvis."

Even in the crowded street Alison felt that she could scarcely repress a little cry, so suddenly was this knowledge sprung upon her that Noel had heard of her marriage. At the same moment she felt thankful that this was so, that the barrier stood between them and danger.

Recognizing that his words were a sort of challenge, she by a strong effort regained her self-control, and, calm to all appearance, said:

"You still come to the City, then?"

It was a stupid thing to say, but she felt that she must speak, must say something, and, above

all, that what she said must be meaningless, trivial.

"Oh, yes," said he. "I am on the Stock Exchange, you know."

"Of course. I had forgotten."

"You have a short memory, Mrs. Jarvis."

For a moment she said nothing to this. They were by this time in the subway, jostled by a crowd going each way. Noel drew her aside out of the rush.

"How did you hear of my marriage?" she asked, in as quiet and calm a tone as she could.

"I learned it by this. Some one was kind enough to send it to me. It was not you, I suppose? Was it your husband?"

As he spoke he took out of his pocket a worn copy of a London paper of a week back, in which, to Alison's amazement, she read this announcement:

"On the 15th instant, by license, S. Jarvis to Alison Clevely."

She gave back the paper with an unsteady hand. She was puzzled, alarmed.

"Some one sent this to you, you say?"

"Yes. Is—is the announcement—genuine?"

She hesitated, and the effect of that moment's hesitation upon him showed her how necessary it was at all hazards to keep up the farce, for the present, at least. He was ready to devour her answer.

So she said, breathing quickly and playing nervously with the paper, without looking up:

"Yes, it is true."

There was a pause. It cut her to the heart to know how much pain he was suffering. And yet, whatever agony there might be in his heart, it could scarcely equal that in her own.

"It was rather sudden, wasn't it? Or—or were you engaged all the time—when you came down to Riverscourt, for instance?"

"No, I was not engaged then."

There was another pause. Then he said, sharply:

"You are living in London?"

"Yes."

"You have not been long over the honeymoon?"

"There was no honeymoon," said Alison, impatiently.

"No? You have settled down to housekeeping at once?"

"No, oh, no! What does it matter to you?"

He was pressing her with his questions in what she felt to be an unjustifiable way. Knowing that her powers of resistance and of dissimulation were limited, she grew restive and spoke sharply.

"It matters in this only, that you don't look happy. Are you happy?"

He had almost reached her breaking point, and she knew it. Trying to laugh, yet to appear offended at the same time, she said, restlessly:

"Is that a fair question, Mr. Noel? It seems to me that it is not."

"I beg your pardon. Perhaps it's not; but I should not have asked it if I had not been so anxious to hear the best news possible of you—in every way."

She felt that she must escape. She could not bear this. Her hands were tightly clenched; her breath was coming fast. Did he guess anything? No, he could not. And yet—what intuition was it that made him know so much?

At last she said desperately:

"I am grateful for your good wishes; indeed, I knew I had them. If I'm not very happy—yet, it is my own fault, entirely my own fault."

"Your husband is good to you?"

She rapped out the answer breathlessly: "Quite as good as I deserve."

"In that case he is perfection." Another pause. "May I know where you live?"

"We're—we're not settled yet," said she, evasively.

With mingled anger and alarm she saw that Noel was not satisfied, but that he meant to be.

He persisted in his interrogatory.

"Is Mr. Jarvis in business in London?"

"Yes." She woke up to the remembrance that she must make a good fight for it. "He's a dealer in works of art," she said.

Noel looked interested.

"Is he? Then he ought to introduce himself to my father. He's always adding to his collection,



and dealers all over the Continent, as well as in England, write to him when they have anything specially good to sell. Has Mr. Jarvis any specialty?"

"He's just sold a snuff-box for eighteen hundred pounds," said Alison, rather by way of keeping up appearances than because she wished to impart this particular piece of information.

"Indeed! That must have been something worth having."

"Yes, it was very pretty, though I was surprised to hear it was worth so much. It was unique, they said."

"What was it like?"

"It was dark blue enamel, with two miniatures on the lid, each in a circle of diamonds and surmounted by a crown."

Noel stared at her.

"Are you sure you've described it rightly?" he asked.

"Quite. Why?"

"Because there's only one snuff-box exactly like that in existence. It was made for Louis XVI. of France, and—it is in my father's collection," said Noel.

Alison looked at him with a sound like the surging of the sea in her ears. Had Noel made a mistake? Or had she? Or—how had the unique snuff-box from Mr. Darke's collection come into the possession of Sydney Jarvis, *alias* Jerdan?

## CHAPTER X.

BOTH Noel and Alison remained silent for a few moments, each considering the mystery of the unique snuff-box from a different point of view. Noel, on his side, was quite sure that his father would never have sold what he considered one of the gems of his collection, and that Alison must have made a mistake in her description; while Alison was equally sure that she had accurately described what she had seen, and asked herself how the treasure had come into the possession of Sydney Jarvis.

Rousing herself abruptly from the stupefaction into which Noel's statement had thrown her, she made a movement in the direction of the trains.

"Where are you going?" asked Noel.

"Down to Riverscourt," she answered, promptly. "I'm going to see Mr. Darke, your father. He'll be able to tell me——"

"Let me go with you," said Noel, eagerly. "I quite agree with you that it's most important that this should be cleared up. It looks as if the snuff-box your husband got hold of were a copy, and——"

Alison smiled and shook her head. She had something much more important to her than the identification of a snuff-box in her mind. By a cautious question or two to the elder Mr. Darke she had no doubt that she would be able to trace Sydney Jarvis, either under that name or under

the name of Jerdan. It was quite possible, she thought, that Mr. Darke might sell some of the articles in his collection, as well as buy others, without communicating the details of every transaction to his family; and if, as Noel stated, he was in communication with all the principal dealers in Europe, it seemed natural enough that Sydney Jarvis, in his capacity of agent, should have had dealings with him.

In fairness to Sydney, however, she did not want to discuss the matter further with Noel until she had more absolute knowledge. This knowledge she was eager to obtain.

Noel misunderstood the reason of her reluctance to let him accompany her.

"Are you afraid your husband will be angry if you let me go with you to Riverscourt?"

"Oh, no! But I think your father might be."

A cloud seemed to settle at once on Noel's handsome face. He looked at her with an expression in which she saw a rising suspicion.

"Are you *really* married?" he asked, abruptly, "or is it all fudge? Is this advertisement merely a ruse of my family to make me think you were married?"

He saw by the startled look on her face that his accusation was, at least, a shrewd one. She was so much surprised, indeed, that she uttered a rash answer:

"A ruse! Oh, no! *I wish it were!*"

The words were hardly out of her mouth when she recognized her own imprudence, and with a

little exclamation of vexation and distress she broke away from him and tried to escape into the crowd. Indeed, she thought she had succeeded. But when she had taken her ticket for Earl's Court and got into the train, which was starting, she found, before the door was shut, that Noel had got in and placed himself on the opposite seat.

"You have no right to come, and it's foolish, besides!" gasped she.

"No," said he, doggedly, "it's not foolish, and it's not wrong. Don't put on these airs to me. You know perfectly well that if you made no mystery about this marriage of yours, that if you would tell me in so many words that you were really married, I should never dream of obtruding myself upon you. But you will not tell me that. You hesitate, you prevaricate, you won't answer a straightforward question as to who your husband is, or what he is, or where he is. Now, how can I suppose that you are acting straightforwardly toward me when you won't give me a plain answer of any sort?"

Alison made no answer. Thinking she had got rid of him, for the time at least, she had, as it were, let herself down a little, when his sudden reappearance forced her to screw up her courage again to the mark of fencing with him. How could she be straightforward when she was herself in a maze of perplexity as to her own position? How could she tell the plain truth, when she did not know what the plain truth was?

Above all, how could she trust herself to confide ever so little in this man whose every look made her heart ache, and in whose presence only the very strongest effort of self-control sufficed to hide the tremulous joy this meeting gave her? She was alarmed, shocked, ashamed, poor girl, to find how strong her own feelings were, and that the baffled attempt to cut herself off from him forever had had its natural effect of increasing the strength of her passion.

Every word he uttered seemed to vibrate in her heart, and when he paused and waited for her answer, she clenched her teeth and made a vigorous effort for self-control before replying. When she spoke her voice was low, indeed, so low that he had to bend forward to hear her through the noise of the train; but she spoke firmly, deliberately, and without hesitation.

"I am as straightforward as I dare to be. I want you to understand that, to believe it. If I seem to be making a mystery of what is no mystery, I want you to believe that it's not my fault. I think you ought to believe that I'm trying to act for the best. If you'll look back you will see I was right to go away without saying anything, that I did it because it was best for you as well as for me. But—hush—don't interrupt—it's very hard to speak, but you must let me finish. Now that it's all over—for it is all over—I want you to respect my motives as well as my actions, and to—and to—leave me alone."

For answer, to her horror, he changed his seat

to the one beside her. They were alone in the compartment. His answer was given into her ear.

"I do respect your motives. I know that your high spirit made you run away and hide yourself rather than consent to marry me against my father's wishes."

"Yes, oh, yes, and I was right—I was right," panted Alison, turning to face him, and looking unmistakably frightened.

"You were right from your own selfish point of view—yes," replied Noel, in passionate tones that rang out above the noise of the wheels.

"Selfish!"

"Yes, selfish. It was your own comfort you were considering, your own pride—the pride that wouldn't let a man say, 'I've given up everything for you.'"

"Well, and wasn't I right? Wasn't it better to let you please your family and marry in your own rank?"

"My family be hanged, and my rank be d——!" replied Noel, hotly. "That was my affair. My family can marry to please itself, but I have no intention of marrying except to please myself. As for this precious rank of mine, that's what I want—to marry *in* it, not *out* of it. And that's why I choose to marry a gentlewoman—a beautiful gentlewoman of my own age and of my own standing, and not to introduce myself into a family of higher rank than mine, which would con-

sider it did me honor by letting me bestow my father's money upon its unattractive daughter."

Into Alison's heart, as he poured out this passionate tirade, there stole a sense of comfort and gladness which gave her strength to carry on the fight.

"Anyhow, I *was* right," persisted she, stubbornly, but faintly.

"You were right for yourself, but not right for me. Why should you think more of my family's wishes than you did of mine?"

"Because—because," stammered Alison, "you're only a young man, passionate and hot-headed; you may take a fancy to a girl and think you like her well enough to give up a great deal for her, and then you may be sorry and wish you had been more prudent."

"Now," said Noel, leaning back and looking at her shrewdly, "you are describing yourself rather than me. It is *you* who appear to have taken a fancy to a man rather suddenly, to have married him in haste, and then to have been promptly sorry!"

Alison grew white and alarmed.

"Did I say that?" stammered she.

"Something like it, I think. But I'll give you the opportunity to draw back, if you like. Come, *are* you sorry, or are you not?"

Alison was really alarmed. She saw that Noel did not believe in the reality of her marriage, and that he meant to get at the truth. She had

fenced so far successfully that she had avoided giving him any clue to the facts, but she felt that her guard was growing weak, that at any moment she might slip and be at his mercy.

How could she ever have cherished the idea of confiding the circumstances to him? She saw that he would have looked upon the ceremony she had gone through as a mere farce, without binding value, and that he would never have rested till he had obtained her release from it, as she had now a strong belief that he could do.

For that there had been trickery of some kind in the marriage she was sure. It had, however, this importance: that she could use it as a barrier against Noel in his own interest, for she still obstinately clung to her own view of the matter and refused to accept his. "I am sorry," she said at last, hoarsely, "that I thought it safe to meet *you*, that I trusted you not to give me more pain than I am obliged to suffer."

The words cut Noel like a knife. He drew back, with a sharply drawn breath, and then, after a moment's hesitation, went quietly back to the opposite seat. It was her turn to feel pain then. The tears sprang to her eyes as he said, in a voice which betrayed the remorse and shame he felt:

"I beg your pardon. I'm deeply, deeply sorry if I've really pained you. I—I thought—somehow—you didn't care."

There was a rather long silence. Then Alison spoke, very gravely, very earnestly, without look-



ing at him, for she feared that the meeting of eye to eye would betray too much:

"If I've ever seemed not to care for any one's kindness, any one's consideration for me, it's because I didn't want to appear to care too much. If I don't or can't care as much as I ought to do for any one whom it's my duty now to care for, why, I ought to be pitied for that, and my wish to do right ought to be respected."

Noel looked at her searchingly. Feeling that they were still on dangerous ground, she suddenly changed the subject by asking:

"Has anything else been found out at Riverscourt—about the poor girl, I mean, who was murdered?"

"Notling whatever," said Noel. "Nobody who excited any suspicion has been seen about, and nothing has been found out that has helped to clear up the mystery. The police, I believe, still talk about clues, but that probably means nothing at all."

She saw that he had heard nothing about the attempt to shoot her on her way to the station on the evening after the inquest; and, knowing that her view of her assailant corresponded with his view of the man who had run after Anne Saunders, she now related her adventure to him.

He listened in breathless interest, and when she had finished he said, in a hoarse voice:

"It was the man I saw—I could swear it—a broad-shouldered man in a peaked cap. Now, tell

me, did he remind you of—of any one you had ever seen before?"

"Not in the least," said Alison, promptly. Then, seeing that there was some thought in his mind which he had not yet betrayed, she asked, with abruptness which was meant to disconcert him and put him off his guard: "Whom did he remind you of?"

But in return he only asked another question:

"Did he look at all like any one you had seen at our house?"

"You mean Colonel Cressingham?" said she, suddenly.

"Did he?" persisted Noel, ignoring her words.

Reluctantly she had to say, "No."

Noel threw himself back in the corner and pulled his straw hat over his eyes. The action irritated, bewildered her. Surely he could trust her to be discreet, and in the face of what she knew he might let her know more if he could!

"You know who it was," she said, suddenly.

He sat up at once and faced her.

"I will tell you all I know," said he. "Something in the man's figure did remind me of some one I had seen, and I was told that the man was a lunatic, a connection of some one in our house, who had been missing for two days past from the private asylum where he was confined."

"I hope they've caught him," said Alison, drily.

"You don't believe the story?"

"I don't believe or disbelieve anything. The

whole affair seems to me a mystery, from which other little mysteries branch out."

They had reached Earl's Court, and Alison rose to get out.

"Where are you going?" said Noel, when he was standing on the platform, having jumped out to help her alight.

She faced him steadily.

"I am going home," said she, "and I forbid you to come, too."

"Why?"

"I'm not bound to give any reason. I want you just to take this as a reason—that I think it best."

But Noel was restive, and inclined to be persistent.

"There's no harm in my coming with you as far as your door," said he. "You know very well I'll be as submissive as you please."

"But if I ask you not to?"

"I will obey at once if you'll give a reason—a proper, sufficient reason," said he, obstinately.

She hesitated. Then she slowly raised her beautiful dark eyes and met his straightforwardly.

"If I give you a good reason for forbidding you to come, you promise to obey?"

"Yes, I promise."

"Very well, then"—a deep blush spread over her handsome face as, modestly, gravely, she gave her reason in three words—"I love you."

A shiver passed through him as the soft words

reached his ears. He made one slight, convulsive forward movement. Then, holding out his hand, he took hers in a strong grip, looked her straight in the eyes, and whispered:

"God bless you for that! God bless you for trusting me!"

Then, without another word, he went away, crossing over to the other platform without a glance behind.

Alison was on the verge of an outburst of tears, but she held her head bravely up, bit back the trembling words, conquered that lump in her throat, and set out on her walk home with a full heart.

Two days later, on Monday, at luncheon time, having got leave of absence grudgingly given from the office where she was employed, Alison went down to Riverscourt. She had carefully chosen this time of the day in order to avoid a possible meeting with Noel, who was still in the city. It was a fine, warm July day, and the beautiful grounds of Mr. Darke's riverside mansion looked their best. Alison, as she went by the broad drive toward the house, between high hedges of laurel and yew, beech and birch tree, felt a sort of wonder that this pleasant spot should bear such ugly associations of mystery and crime.

Turning suddenly out of the drive into the open garden that lay in front of the house, she shuddered as she glanced toward the red wall of

the gallery, connected in her mind with the tragedy of poor Anne Saunders' death.

The smooth lawn, with its araucarias and its fir trees, lay on her left hand; to the right was the red brick mansion; and the river, sparkling in the sunlight, ran in the distance in front of her, seen in glimpses through the intervening trees.

With a loudly beating heart she crossed the wide graveled space, and had almost reached the door, when it opened, and a man came rapidly down the steps.

He came out so quickly, with such brisk, nimble little steps, that he could not stop himself, and almost ran into the arms of Alison as she came up.

She it was who stopped short first, and uttered a low cry.

For it was Sydney Jarvis, the man who had married her in the Manchester church just three weeks before.

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## CHAPTER XI.

THE effect the meeting had upon Alison was, however, as nothing to the effect it had upon Sydney Jarvis.

The little, fair man became almost blue; he stared at his wife with bloodshot light eyes, his

jaw dropped, his limbs trembled. If he had been suddenly confronted by a ghost he could not have exhibited more absolute dismay than he did on finding himself face to face with the beautiful girl whom, after weeks of persistent wooing, he had made his wife, only to desert her at the church door.

To Alison's first sensation of astonishment there succeeded quickly one of amusement. He looked so absurd, so helplessly nonplussed, that instead of beginning at once to question, to reproach him, she laughed.

Then Sydney tried to pull himself together, and, after glancing hurriedly at the house, as if to see that no eyes were upon them, he said, quickly:

"Come—come away—come into—into the drive. I—I—I can't speak to you here."

He made a plunge toward the shelter of the evergreens, but if he meant to escape, Alison was too quick for him; by the time he had got out of sight of the house, behind the laurels, she was there, too.

He turned upon her almost fiercely.

"W—w—what are you doing down here?" he said.

Alison laughed outright.

"Surely," she said, "it is for me to ask that, not for you!"

"I'm—I'm here on business," said he, irritably.

"Well, then, so am I."

Sydney stared at her askance, as if she had

been a savage monster whom nothing short of a human sacrifice would propitiate.

"You're—you're very cross, aren't you?" he said, feebly.

"I dare say I am. Don't you think it would make any woman what you call 'cross' to be treated as you've treated me?"

"Hush! Oh, hush!" said Sydney, piteously, glancing around him in evident agony. "Look here, it's—it's most awkward to talk things like this over down here, now, isn't it? Supposing we go outside, and——"

In a persuasive and gentle manner he was trying to lead her toward the outer entrance, but Alison shook her head and remained where she was.

"I'm not going," said she, "till I've spoken to Mr. Darke."

Sydney made a sort of convulsive spring in the air.

"Mr. Darke!" said he. "What on earth do you want with Mr. Darke?"

"I want to know," said she, steadily, "why Sydney Jarvis is selling Mr. Darke's property under the name of Jerdan."

Sydney suddenly threw off his petulant little ways and grew quiet and serious.

"If you do that," said he, "you'll ruin me, that's all."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, that Mr. Darke is one of my best clients, that I'm buying and selling for him constantly,

but that, as he's very strict in his ideas, he'd never employ me again if he was told I'd—I'd run away from my wife!"

Alison hesitated. Luckily for Sydney, her heart was not deeply engaged in her marriage, and it is, moreover, impossible to be cruel to a person who amuses you. And, against her will, Sydney had, during the last five minutes, amused her very much.

"Why did you do it?" she said at last. "It was so very easy *not* to marry me—there was nothing I should have liked better! Why on earth did you worry me and weary me into doing a thing which, the moment it was done, you wished undone?"

Sydney, still more preoccupied with anxiety lest he should be seen or heard with her than with the matter in hand, appeared somewhat at a loss for an answer.

"Well," said he at last, "well, you seemed so friendless——"

She interrupted him with amazement.

"I was less friendless before I had a husband than I've been since," she retorted.

Sydney looked still more alarmed.

"And then you didn't seem to care about me. You seemed sorry you'd married me——" he went on.

"So that you had a telegram sent to you in order to rid me of your presence with the least possible delay?" said Alison, mockingly.



"No, of course I don't mean that. My sister was ill, very ill——"

"I didn't know you had a sister."

"Well, I had, and she's dead——"

"Yet you're not in mourning!"

"Oh, never mind that," said Sydney, pettishly. "I'm not very conventional in my ideas."

"I'm sure you're not. And was it the death of your sister or your marriage with me which made you change your name?"

"I've not changed my name. Jerdan is a trade-name. It's just as common for people to trade as to write under assumed names."

"And does Mr. Darke know that Jerdan is only a trade-name?"

Sydney looked at her anxiously.

"I don't suppose he does. I don't suppose he has any idea that my name is Jarvis, and very likely if he did know he'd disapprove of it. So I do hope you won't go and do me such an ill-natured turn as to tell him!"

He looked at her imploringly, and Alison, much puzzled, but not at all inclined to be unduly harsh, surveyed him with curious eyes.

"There's something not yet explained in all this," she said at last, after a long pause, during which she had reviewed the position in different ways. "No man in his senses could be quite such a weathercock as you've seemed to be. Now, won't you be honest and tell me why you did it?"

Sydney hesitated.

"I don't suppose you'll believe me," he said,

"but the fact is that after you'd promised to marry me and go to Australia I got a little frightened, because I saw you didn't really care about me, and I thought that presently you'd begin to hate me. I was carried away, you know, by your handsome face and that melancholy look of yours, and it was only when I was—well, in for it, if I may say so, that—that—well, that I thought it wouldn't do. So when they telegraphed for me I—I—well, I wasn't sorry. And to look at you, you know, I don't think you're very sorry, either."

Alison had listened very attentively to this lame explanation, and she was rather surprised to find that she believed some part of it at least.

"Well, would anybody," said she, "be sorry to find they had escaped from such a weathercock?"

"Escaped! There, you admit it was an escape," cried he, eagerly. "Then why can't you forgive me and let's be friends?"

Alison stared intently into his gentle, if somewhat weak, face.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked, simply.

"Well, I want you to—to keep quiet, in the first place, and to say you're married to a Mr. Jarvis, but not to let anybody know that it's me."

She looked at him stupidly.

"Am I married?" she asked, shortly.

"Of course you are. And of course I mean to make you an allowance until such time as we see our way to—to——"

Alison drew herself up.

"I don't want any allowance from you," she said. "And I don't want to see my way to anything but getting my freedom again. I suppose if you've married me under a false name I could do so without difficulty."

Sydney's face grew more and more solemn as she went on.

"No, you couldn't, if I had. Look here," said he, "I've been honest with you——"

"Have you?" interrupted Alison, sarcastically.

"Yes, yes, I have, I tell you. And now I want you to be fair to me. I've done you no wrong, and I'm quite willing to provide for you——"

"You wouldn't have been, though, if you hadn't come face to face with me when you didn't expect to," put in Alison.

"Well, as I tell you, I had business to attend to, and I—well, I forgot. Now, listen. All I ask is for you to call yourself Mrs. Jarvis, and not Mrs. Jerdan. Tell the Darkes, if you like, that you've been deserted by your rascally husband Jarvis, but don't let them know it's poor little me."

"I have told one of them," said Alison, grimly. Sydney looked alarmed again.

"Well, then, why do you want to say any more? Do, do go back now, there's a dear, good creature, and don't get me into trouble with old Mr. Darke."

"You can't expect me to be satisfied with things as they are."

"I don't expect it. All I ask is that you will

wait a little—wait till I can settle something before you ‘give me away.’ Just consider, Mr. Darke is my best client; I wouldn’t offend him on any account. Give me just time enough to settle accounts with him, so that I can snap my fingers at him, as it were, and then you shall tell him who I am and get free from me if you want to—if you can. Now, will you promise?”

Alison was puzzled still. She hesitated.

“How long do you want me to wait?” she asked.

“Will you wait three months?”

“So long as that! If I did, it might spoil my chance of getting my freedom.”

“No, it wouldn’t. Why should it? I say you can’t get free; you say you can. It will be no more difficult to prove the truth one way or the other in three months’ time than it would be now. I shan’t come in your way; I’m always traveling about. And I’ll do anything I can for you—anything you’ll let me do. I can let you have money——”

“That I should certainly not take. You’ve treated me very badly, and I decline to enter into any arrangement or to give any promise. I——”

She stopped short, and Sydney Jarvis uttered an exclamation of dismay. Coming upon them suddenly from out of one of the pretty alleys between yew hedges that intersected the garden in all directions was Colonel Cressingham.

Remembering vividly what Paul Penry had told her about this man, and connecting him, as

she instinctively did, with what she went through on her first visit to Riverscourt, Alison felt a sort of sick terror at the sight of his handsome, but in her eyes sinister, face. In his flannels and straw hat, with his face sunburnt, his tawny mustache and blue eyes making him look years younger than his age, Colonel Cressingham was as unlike the conventional idea of a villain as it is possible for a man to be. He appeared much astonished to see the two people who were so earnestly conversing in the drive, and then, apparently recognizing Alison, he raised his hat and said:

"Miss Clevely!"

"She's Mrs. Jarvis now," piped out poor Sydney, hurriedly. "She's married since she was here last—married and been deserted by her husband, Colonel. It's hard to believe, isn't it, that any man could treat her so?"

Alison was so much amazed by this impudence on the part of Sydney that she made no protest, except by an exclamation, which he hastened to cover with more comments of the same kind.

Colonel Cressingham held out his hand with a charming air of sympathy, and Alison asked herself whether this debonair, pleasant man, with his attractive air of good breeding and courtesy, could really be the man of whom Paul Penry had told her such ugly stories.

"Hard to believe? Why, it's simply impossible!" said the Colonel, looking at Alison's handsome face with chivalrous admiration. "Who is

the rascal? Let us find him, that we may promptly decide whether we shall put him in a lunatic asylum or drop him into the river."

"You don't believe it, I see," said Sydney. "But it's true."

The Colonel's face suddenly assumed a more serious expression.

"You must come and see old Darke," said he. "He will advise you as to what steps you ought to take."

Sydney's face grew round with horror, and he seized Alison's arm and tried to lead her toward the entrance, saying as he did so:

"No, no. She doesn't want any advice. She's made up her mind what to do, haven't you—haven't you—er—er—Mrs. Jarvis?"

And as he spoke he looked into her face with such an expression of imploring melancholy that, in the midst of her surprise and perplexity, Alison could scarcely keep back her inclination to laugh again.

"Well, even if she has made up her mind, she will be glad of such a friend as Mr. Darke to help her to get her rights," persisted the Colonel, with perfect suavity, but with an air of quiet determination which filled Sydney with dismay. "What do you think yourself, Mrs. Jarvis?"

Alison gave Sydney a glance which was meant to be reassuring, but at the same time she herself thought that she would like to see Mr. Darke, and she turned to the Colonel and said so. Without taking any further notice of Sydney, therefore,

Colonel Cressingham took her back to the house, which they entered by an open French window, and led her into the presence of the master of the house, who was sitting in his wheel-chair, a little away from his roll-top desk, with a pen in his right hand.

He was not writing, however, and he saw Alison even before she was in the room. Colonel Cressingham was just behind her, and Mr. Darke glanced from her to him before he spoke. In the meantime he held out his hand with one of his courteous, engaging smiles, and said :

"Welcome, thrice welcome! Where have you been hiding yourself all this time? Sit down, sit here, and let an old man enjoy the sight of your brightness and beauty."

Alison sat in the chair he gave her, and saw Mr. Darke look out with an inquiring frown at the disconsolate figure of Sydney, who, not daring either to re-enter the house or to go away, was wandering on the lawn outside, trying to keep within hearing of what went on within, while at the same time keeping himself out of reach of possible wrathful eyes.

Alison, however, had compassion upon him, and did not betray the identity of Mr. Sydney Jarvis with "Mr. Jerdan."

Colonel Cressingham proceeded at once to tell her story.

"You will hardly credit it, Darke," said he, "but Jerdan tells me Miss Clevely has made the mistake of becoming Mrs. Jarvis since she saw

us last, and that this Jarvis, whoever he may be, is a rascal so little worthy of his good fortune as to have deserted his charming young bride already."

Mr. Darke turned his chair and looked blankly at Alison, who blushed under his inspection.

"Do you mean it?" he said, simply.

"Yes," said Alison. "But I ought not to trouble you with my domestic woes, Mr. Darke. Only, I shall be glad if you can tell me this: Is a marriage legal if one of the parties to it uses a false name?"

"Absolutely. It makes no difference at all," said Mr. Darke.

Alison's face fell.

"Even if he took the false name with intent to deceive?"

"That makes no difference. Don't you see, my dear girl, that if it were otherwise, an unscrupulous man could always wriggle out of his matrimonial obligations by simply proving that he had gone through the ceremony under a name other than his own?"

"I see. I hadn't thought of that."

There was a short silence, during which Alison looked on the floor, debating what step she should next take. Glancing up suddenly, she caught a look of intelligence passing between the two gentlemen, and she looked searchingly from the one to the other.

"You both have some idea about this," she exclaimed, abruptly. "What is it?"



"Well, my idea," answered Mr. Darke, kindly, "is to find out more about this fellow and to try to get you righted."

She rose quickly to her feet.

"Oh, never mind," she said, hurriedly. "I mean, I thank you very much, but I don't want to say any more about this yet. I must wait a little and give him time to—to make amends himself, if he can."

She was almost conscious of the relief felt at this answer by Sydney, whose shadow she could see moving outside the window. But Mr. Darke laid an imperious hand on her arm and made her sit down again.

"No," said he, "I can't let you go away like that. In fact, I can't let you go away at all just yet. Look here, I've never found an amanuensis like you. I've had to do without one altogether lately, they're all so stupid; or, if they're not, they're ugly. And the one vice is as bad as the other. Suppose you stay here"—Alison started in surprise—"just for a few weeks, at any rate, and do my typewriting for me. I'll pay any forfeit to the people who are employing you now. Then we can talk things over, and I'll see my solicitor for you, and we'll find out what is best to be done."

Alison, half-stunned by the unexpectedness of this offer, tried in vain to refuse. She was overwhelmed, overborne by the persistence, not only of Mr. Darke, but of the Colonel, who warmly agreed that this was the best thing she could do.

"It's not kindness, only selfishness on my part," said Mr. Darke, frankly; "for look at this pile of letters which I am wading through all by myself, just because I can't get any intelligent help."

Half against her will, Alison allowed herself to be persuaded to return to Riverscourt, if only for a week, as secretary to its master. And then, anxious for a few minutes' quiet thought, she excused herself from staying to tea, saying she had arrangements to make which she must attend to at once.

So she bade farewell to the two gentlemen, and leaving the Colonel at the entrance gate, to which he accompanied her, she set out for the station.

She had almost forgotten Sydney, when she heard his panting voice behind her at the first bend in the road.

His eyes were starting out of his head; he was gasping as if with a long run.

"What's the matter?" asked Alison, rather alarmed by his appearance.

He put his hand heavily on her arm.

"You've—engaged yourself—to stay—at Riverscourt?" panted he.

"Yes," said she, adding, scornfully. "Don't be afraid; I'll keep your secret, as I said I would."

Sydney shook his head vehemently.

"I don't—mean that—I don't, indeed. But—listen to me—if you go there—if you stay there again—*you'll never come away alive!*"

## CHAPTER XII.

"REALLY, Sydney, how can you be so absurd?"

Alison stared at him with gentle derision, perceiving that he was in earnest, and that this warning was not given by way of a jest.

"I'm not absurd. Look here, why on earth should I warn you unless I knew you were in danger, real danger? Wouldn't it be to my interest *not* to warn you, since you can do me a lot of harm if you like to turn nasty? I tell you it's not safe for you to stay at Riverscourt, and if you're wise you'll just take my tip and not turn up here again."

Impressed in spite of herself, yet quite aware at the same time that Sydney was not implicitly to be trusted, Alison temporized:

"Give me your reason, then. What have I got to be afraid of?"

"Some odd things have happened there. Come, don't pretend you haven't heard of them," said Sydney, looking down.

"Of course, I've heard all about the drowning of the poor girl, but that was supposed to be the work of a lunatic, wasn't it? If so, means must have been taken by this time to have him kept under proper restraint."

"I don't know anything about a lunatic," said Sydney, sullenly, "but I know there's a son who drinks, and who is jealous of his half-brothers, and I know, too, that Noel is desperately in love

with you, and that it would be most unwise of you to stay in the same house with him. They're a passionate family, brought up to have everything in the world they want, unused to being thwarted, and I wonder you can't see yourself what a difficult position you'd be in."

"Perhaps I do see that," said Alison, "but, remember, it's not the first difficult position I've been placed in——" and she gave him a glance full of reproachful meaning. "And you may depend upon my knowing how to take care of myself, while you can depend also upon Noel, at least, to behave in a perfectly honorable and straightforward manner."

"Confound Noel!" said Sydney, with testiness unusual to him. "I say I won't have you stay here."

Alison faced him steadily.

"I know who it is you're afraid of," she said, suddenly.

He looked up with a scared expression of face.

"Hush!" said he, looking round him again in the nervous way he had done when in the Rivers-court grounds.

She went on: "It's not Noel Darke, or Swithin, but Colonel Cressingham."

Sydney's face underwent yet another change and became quite livid. "What do you know about him?" he whispered.

"More than you do, perhaps."

Sydney again grasped her arm and whispered hoarsely in her ear: "For heaven's sake, take

care! If you do know anything, why on earth do you want to run right into the lion's mouth?"

A chill seized her, and for a moment she was inclined to listen to his warnings, and to draw back from her promise to Mr. Darke. But before she could make any answer, before, indeed, she had quite made up her mind what to say, Sydney turned away nervously at the sound of a horse's hoofs in the road beyond the turning, and she at once asked herself why she should heed what he said, when she had had very good reason to know that he was not to be trusted.

This very dread of his that he should be discovered in her society was enough to put her on her guard against him; he watched for the approach of the horse from the other side of the road, and by the time the animal appeared in sight, and proved to be only a cart-horse with a boy on its back, Alison had made up her mind to keep to the course of action she had marked out for herself and to return to Riverscourt.

Of course, Sydney was anxious to keep her away, afraid as he was that she would betray him as the man who had married her under the name of Jarvis. And whatever the vague dangers to be dreaded from Colonel Cressingham might be, they were counterbalanced by the good will of Mr. Darke, who had always been kind to her.

Besides, a natural curiosity to get to the bottom of the mystery which surrounded Riverscourt was stronger than any fears she might have either for Noel or herself. If the murder of poor

Anne Saunders could be explained by the anxiety of a would-be burglar not to be identified, there was no such explanation possible in the case of the attempt to shoot herself. And if, as Noel had suggested, both these crimes were the work of a lunatic, how was it that nothing more had been heard of this dangerous person?

Noel had said that both crimes were probably the work of a man who had been missing for two days from a private lunatic asylum. Was he missing from the asylum still? And if so, where was he? And, above all, who was he?

It was useless to address such questions as these to Sydney, whose one desire was to keep her quiet and to cut her off from all communication with the Darke family. But they were interesting questions, for all that, and it seemed to Alison that her best chance of getting them answered was to address them, at the first favorable opportunity, to old Mr. Darke himself.

If they were indiscreet, he would understand how inevitable it was that she should ask them. If they were to be answered, it was from him that she had the best chance of getting the information she wanted. From his invalid chair Mr. Darke kept a keen eye on what passed in the world outside; and, though he might occasionally be deceived as to the character of the men whom he made his friends, as in the case of Colonel Cressingham, Alison felt none the less sure that he was a man of strong intelligence, in whom she could confide more safely than in any one else.

Of course, under all this mass of reasons why she should accept Mr. Darke's offer, there lay the half-unacknowledged hope that he might of his own accord exert himself to free her from the tie which bound her to Sydney when he realized how determined his favorite son, Noel, was not to marry except for love. That the tie itself was more than a nominal one, that she would have any serious difficulty in breaking it, she did not believe. The suggestion about Sydney Jarvis' whole course of action was that there was fraud underlying it all: if the marriage itself were not in some way an illegal one, surely his immediate and causeless desertion rendered it null and void.

So reasoned Alison, and though she still meant to keep up the fiction that she was married, in order to raise a necessary barrier between herself and Noel until such time as she should be free, and Mrs. Darke's possible objections to her as a daughter-in-law should be removed, she was resolved henceforth to look upon the marriage tie as a fiction only, and to relax no efforts until she had got herself free in fact.

After all, was she sure that old Mr. Darke would object to her marrying his son? He made no secret of his liking, of his chivalrous admiration for her; was it not rather from the ladies that the opposition to Noel's wishes came?

To this last question she soon got a decisive answer.

Having managed to avoid Sydney by hastening on at such a pace that he could not overtake her

without obviously running after her, she took care to get into a compartment that was half full of passengers, and reached home without further molestation.

On the following morning she got a letter from old Mr. Darke, containing a check for ten pounds, with a kind little letter in which he said that she was to look upon this as payment in advance for one month of her services, and that in case she might want to "smartens herself up" in view of the approaching regatta, he sent it to her at once.

This letter began, "My Dear Mrs. Jarvis," but was addressed on the envelope to "Miss Clevely," which Alison thought a conclusive proof both of his cleverness and his consideration.

She was much elated by this strong evidence of Mr. Darke's good feeling toward her, and it was with a lighter heart than she had had for many a day that she started for the office where she had been employed and gave her week's notice preparatory to going to Riverscourt.

She wrote a grateful letter to old Mr. Darke, and busied herself during the week, in all her spare time, in fulfilling his instructions to "smartens herself up." The result was that when she arrived at Riverscourt on the following Monday, after an uneventful week, she looked her best in a neat tailor-made dress of dark blue serge, with a cream-colored muslin blouse and a cream-colored hat of sailor shape, trimmed with dark blue ribbon.

Lady Rosina, who was the very first person she



met in the Riverscourt grounds, was unpleasantly conscious of the improvement in the appearance of the handsome typewriter girl, whose severely simple dress made her own elaborate toilet, with its frills, ruffles, feathers and fringes, look "messy" and undistinguished by comparison.

It was not much past twelve o'clock, and Alison hoped to be able to get some work done before luncheon. But when she asked for Mr. Darke, she was told that he was not very well that day, and she was shown into the morning-room, where she was left alone until the ladies of the house and Lady Rosina came in together.

And then she understood at once that they were all in battle array against her. Mrs. Darke was haughty and frigid; Lady Rosina ignored her when she could, and stared at her insolently when she could not. Carrie was frankly rude in a juvenile and aggressive way. But Carrie was younger, more bearable, more human than the others, and Alison deliberately sought and found an opportunity of speaking to her frankly.

"Why are you all so cold, so rude to me?" she asked the young girl, when the other ladies were deeply engaged in comparing the points of their respective dogs, two snarling little darlings who were growling at each other from rival laps.

"Rude! I'm sure we didn't mean to be rude," said Carrie, evasively, with a shamefaced blush.

"It's very unnecessary, you know," said Alison, quietly. "Mr. Darke asked me to come here, but now that I know you and Mrs. Darke disapprove

of my coming, as it's evident you do, I shall only wait till I can see him, to tell him that, in view of your attitude to me, I can't stay."

A look of intense alarm appeared at once on Carrie's face.

"Oh, don't do that—pray don't do that! You don't know what we should have to go through if we interfered with any arrangement of my father's! He's taken such a fancy to you that you don't know what he's like. But he's a perfect autocrat, and what he wants has to be done. I assure you we never meant to be—to be 'nasty,' you know."

Alison smiled.

"Can you tell me, then," said she, drily, "how you have come to give me such an admirable imitation of 'nastiness' without meaning it?"

Mrs. Darke and Lady Rosina were conversing in an undertone, and the typewriter girl knew that it was about her. Carrie, flushed and uneasy, glanced at them, and then said, frankly:

"I'll tell you. You know—you must know—about my brother Noel and Lady Rosina."

"Do you mean that they're engaged?"

Carrie made a little petulant grimace.

"They would have been if you hadn't appeared again upon the scene," she said, fretfully. "He's bound in honor to marry her, since this half-engagement has gone so long, and he went so far as to promise my mother that he would marry her if he couldn't marry you. There! Now, I've been perfectly frank with you, and I really think

you ought to get us out of this difficulty by going away of your own accord."

"But you're manufacturing difficulties!" said Alison. "Don't you know that I'm married?"

"Oh, that makes no difference!" said Carrie, pettishly. "I mean, of course, he can't marry you if you're married already; but if he constantly sees you before his eyes to remind him of the type of woman he likes best, it's not at all likely that he will feel ready to marry a woman whom he'll be always comparing with you to her disadvantage."

Alison listened to this speech in silence. The thought expressed in it was much too subtle to have been evolved from the brain of a young girl, and it was evident that it had been put into her head by some one of much more experience. After a pause she said:

"Why didn't you suggest this to Mr. Darke before I came?"

"Oh, you don't know papa! It's of no use suggesting things to him. He never troubles his head about anything but his own ideas and his own convenience. He says he's never had a secretary like you, and that's enough for him."

"Well, he won't have me long, unless you and Mrs. Darke are nicer to me than you've been to-day," said Alison, calmly. "I didn't want to come here; you can see that my position will be difficult; besides, I don't like living in other people's houses; I like to be independent, and to do my day's work and then be free. So if you and

the other ladies should come to blows with Mr. Darke about me and get the best of it, I should be very glad, and at ten minutes' notice I should pack up and go away."

Carrie looked at her and burst out laughing.

"I do wish you could change places with somebody I know," she said, impulsively, after a moment's pause. "For I do like you; you're not like other girls, and you're funny—really *funny*. There's a twinkle in your eyes all the time, as if you thought it all a joke. Now, Lady Rosina," she added, with a sigh, "has no sense of humor. Perhaps earl's daughters never do have. That's why their brothers go and marry Gaiety girls and serio-comic singers from the music-halls. They must be a pleasant change from the dulness of the domestic hearth!"

Again Alison thought she must be listening to the echo of some one else's ideas, but she only laughed and agreed with the suggestion.

"But, really, you know," she added, with the twinkle in her eyes of which Carrie had spoken, "I'm not quite the same as a serio-comic, even if I have got a twinkle in my eyes."

And, to the surprise of the other ladies, Carrie broke into a peal of hearty laughter, so mirthful, so genuine, that it suggested that she must have gone over to the enemy, as, indeed, she was in danger of doing.

Alison, however, was puzzled and uneasy. She perceived that the difficulties of her position would be even greater than she had supposed.

and the more she considered Sydney's warnings on the one hand, and the family division on her account on the other, the more doubtful she felt as to the wisdom of her own conduct in accepting Mr. Darke's offer.

Her reflections were interrupted by the entrance of Mr. Darke himself.

He looked pale and ill, she thought, and he leaned heavily upon the arm of Captain Lansdell on the one side and his stick on the other.

But he was just as kind as ever, and he came straight up to her, held out his hand, and told her she would have to be very patient with him, as he was getting old and infirm and ill-tempered, and a trifle deaf into the bargain.

"However," he went on, with that courteous smile which Alison found so fascinating, "Mrs. Darke and Carrie will make up for my crotchety-ness, and if you find me very peevish you can punish me by refusing to work any more for the day."

"I don't think I should dare to do that," laughed Alison. "But I suspect, Mr. Darke, that you're not quite so dreadful as you like to think. Perhaps what you call your crotchety-ness may even be more acceptable than other people's niceness," she added, with demure meaning, which caused Mrs. Darke to throw at her a glance of alarm.

"We shall do our best to make you happy, I'm sure, Mrs. Jarvis," said that lady, quickly.

And there was much significance in the slight

frown with which Mr. Darke glanced at his wife out of his black eyes, and said incisively :

"I'm sure you will."

The luncheon gong had sounded, and they all adjourned to the dining-room, where Alison found herself placed on Mr. Darke's left hand, facing Lady Rosina on his right.

As they entered the room she noticed casually that there were three men-servants in it, but it was not until she had taken her seat that it struck her that there was something familiar, yet strange, in the appearance of one of them. He was a man rather short for a footman, but with the usual clean-shaven, expressionless footman face, and, although she glanced at him again, she could not fix her vague recollection of having seen him before.

It was not until he came round to her and said, "Claret, ma'am?" that she suddenly remembered the voice and connected it at once with its owner.

"No, thank you," said she.

And she contrived to get a look at the man's face as she answered, and knew that the short footman was Paul Penry.

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### CHAPTER XIII.

ALISON could scarcely eat after the discovery she had made. If she had doubted the difficulty of her position before, she could not doubt it now.

That Paul Penry was not an ordinary manservant, but was at Riverscourt in the capacity of detective, she was sure, and the questions which agitated her were: in whose interest was he there? and whom was he watching?

Remembering what he had told her about Colonel Cressingham, and knowing what a very frequent visitor at Riverscourt the Colonel was, she had, of course, little difficulty in deciding that it was he who was the object of Penry's attentions. Knowing, however, as she did, that very little card-playing went on in Mr. Darke's house, she thought it could not be the Colonel's old crime of cheating at cards which was now occupying the detective's attention.

What, then, was it?

To this question she could, of course, imagine no satisfactory answer, nor did it seem probable that she would easily get one from anybody. Of course, she dared not even try to get speech with Penry himself. Although she knew that he must recognize her, it was impossible to detect in his face the slightest acknowledgment of the fact. The closest scrutiny of his blank face would have failed to detect the slightest difference between the way in which he looked at her and the way in which he looked at the others.

Poor Alison was in a state of torment. She felt like an intruder, a spy. For there was not the smallest doubt in her own mind that it was Penry's chance discovery, through her, of the whereabouts of Colonel Cressingham which had

led him to follow up this clue by engaging himself as a servant in the house so much frequented by the quondam card-sharper.

She felt like a traitress both to Mr. Darke and to Noel. Should she confide in either of them, and tell them in so many words that one of their servants was a detective?

Alison shrank from this course! In the first place, she felt that any sort of confidence to Noel would be dangerous; the only safe footing for them to be on was one of distant courtesy and mutual avoidance. While, as for confiding in Mr. Darke, she felt that she scarcely had the courage for this course. To begin with, it seemed hardly likely that the autocrat would believe her. That a detective should dare to establish himself under his roof to watch one of his guests was a contingency which he would sweep aside as an impossibility. If, on the other hand, he should believe her, she would feel that she was betraying another of her friends; for Paul Penry had shown her disinterested kindness, and, although the thought that he was a professional detective was repugnant to her, he was not only doing his own duty in tracking a criminal, but a duty which was that of the community, also.

And then there fell upon her a shuddering remembrance of what, in the sunshine, the beauty and luxury of the place, the liveliness of the people, and her own preoccupations, she had begun to forget, the sense that there hung over Riverscourt the shadow of mysterious crime.



If Colonel Cressingham were really at the bottom of the murder of Anne Saunders, and of the shooting outrage upon herself, why should she mind the fact that detectives were on his track? Should she not rather rejoice that the house which held Noel and his family would be freed from the shadow of a criminal's constant presence there?

And then, in the cool, pleasant hall, with its marble floor and masses of delicate and beautiful plants, they all came, as they left the dining-room, face to face with the Colonel himself, cool, handsome, well-groomed and charming as ever, in a lounge suit of light gray and a Panama hat.

To see his face of ostentatious dismay when he heard that luncheon was over, to hear his mild pleading that they would give him if it were only a sandwich or a coffee biscuit to stay the pangs of hunger, it seemed to Alison impossible to believe that this courteous, amiable man, with his calm blue eyes, handsome, well-bred face, his demure sense of fun, could be the scoundrel of whose evil doings she had heard so much! Surely there must be some mistake! Surely, surely it would all turn out a monstrous blunder, and the Colonel would be proved as innocent of the mysterious crimes laid to his charge as Mrs. Darke or Captain Lansdell or Noel himself!

And Alison again turned to Lady Rosina's bare-faced suggestion that it must be the unpopular Swithin who was at the bottom of all the mischief.

When the amusement of teasing the belated guest had gone on long enough, the ladies took compassion upon him and led him to the dining-room, he staggering, and professing himself almost too feeble and famine-stricken to be able to walk. And the merry laughter of the ladies rang in Alison's ears as she accompanied Mr. Darke to his study and wrote a few letters for him, which he said must be got rid of before he could enjoy himself with a free conscience. Then, with charming apologies for having to leave her at work on such a lovely day, Mr. Darke allowed himself to be led away by the Captain to try the latter's new motor-car, and the three gentlemen drove off in it together.

Alison, who had a long list of penciled figures to copy out neatly on the typewriter, sat back for a few moments to consider that odd sight she had witnessed an hour before of Colonel Cressingham handing his hat and stick to the respectful Penry, and little guessing to whose hands he was entrusting his property.

On the lawn outside the window the ladies were sauntering in the sunshine. They formed a pretty picture in their light dresses, with paper Japanese sunshades of brilliant colors to temper the glare of the July sun, and their voices came pleasantly to the ear, mellowed by just enough distance for the typewriter girl to be unable to hear their rather spiteful comments upon herself.

And presently a young man joined them, and was met by a chorus of eager, caressing voices—

a young man in a suit of light gray flannel, with a straw hat. And Alison's heart began to beat very fast as she drew herself up and bent her eyes on her work again.

For the newcomer was Noel.

From time to time, however, she could not forbear a glance at the group outside, and she heard and saw enough to make her understand why Noel did not show as much eagerness for the match with Lady Rosina as his relations did.

For Lord Geldestone's daughter was so strongly conscious of being a person of consequence, so thoroughly convinced that the whole of the Darke family, including Noel, hung on her every word and were ready to die for her smiles, that not all Noel's manifest indifference and frank abstention from paying her exclusive attention sufficed to dissuade her from the belief that he was as anxious to win her hand as she was to bestow it. The consequence of this blindness in the spoilt woman was that she indulged toward him in a series of open and rather awkward coquetries, which seemed charming to Mrs. Darke and Carrie, and thoroughly repellant to the object of them.

It was, indeed, with difficulty that Noel restrained his inclination to be more curt than was consistent with courtesy when Lady Rosina arched her long neck and, holding a rose to her face, said, with a demure look :

"They've been worrying me all day to give them this rose, Mr. Darke; one that I coaxed

out of my father this morning; the very last from the prize plant he's so proud of. But I wouldn't—I saved it for *you*."

And with one of those little wayward gestures which look pretty in a small woman, but woefully angular and out of place in a tall one, she made a little kittenish spring at him and put in his buttonhole a rose, which was a very beautiful specimen of a new kind, almost black in the depths near its golden center.

"You are very good," said he, trying to be enthusiastic and grateful.

"Yes, aren't I? I hope you appreciate my goodness."

"I do, indeed. Did they all clamor for the rose? I wonder you could withstand my father, if he was one of the crowd!"

"Well, he wasn't, luckily for you. He was too much taken up with that typewriter girl, Miss—Mrs. Thing—you know, the girl who was mixed up in the murder case."

Noel grew suddenly red, and his tone was unmistakably cold as he said:

"Do you mean Miss Clevely? If so, I assure you she had nothing whatever to do with——"

"Oh, I don't mean she murdered the poor girl, of course. But she *was* mixed up in it, wasn't she? She was a witness or something, and had to swear things. But I forgot. You were quite as much absorbed in her as Mr. Darke was. Only you must restrain your enthusiasm now, for she's got married, hasn't she?"

"I believe so," said Noel, trying to keep his lip from quivering under this ordeal.

"Yes, I thought I heard them call her Mrs. Something or other. People who are concerned in murder cases always get married directly afterward, don't they? The lower classes think that sort of thing so interesting."

And she gave a little, refined shudder.

"I hope it isn't only the lower classes who feel pity for the unfortunate, Lady Rosina," said he. "If it is, I suppose my father and I belong to the lower classes, for we certainly feel interested in this young girl, the more for what she had to suffer through this miserable business."

Lady Rosina bit her lip and shrugged her shoulders. Even she perceived that she had made a mistake.

"Oh, of course," said she.

And she turned toward Carrie and gave Noel an opportunity to escape.

Alison saw that he had left the group on the lawn, and presently she heard his step in the corridor outside. The next minute he had entered the room. Glancing up nervously, she was relieved to find that he had put himself under strong constraint on his side, just as she had done on hers, and that, from his manner as he came up and addressed her, she might have been as uninteresting to him as Lady Rosina herself.

"How do you do, Mrs. Jarvis? Hard at work, I see!"

He held out his hand, and, though his touch

thrilled her with mingled pleasure and pain, she maintained a look and attitude as reserved, as grave and cool, as his own. It was a strange contrast to the airs and graces, the shrugs and up-looks, of poor, dull-eyed Lady Rosina.

"Yes. Mr. Darke's gone out with Colonel Cressingham in Captain Lansdell's motor-car. He's left me some work to do, though."

And click-click went the typewriter again.

There was silence for a few minutes. But she knew that he had something on his mind, and presently he came a little nearer and said, in a lower voice:

"By-the-bye, I spoke to him about the snuff-box."

Alison looked up, alert, full of excitement.

"Well?" she said.

"And I think you must have made a mistake. He said he didn't remember it."

Alison looked at him curiously.

"Didn't remember that he had such a snuff-box?"

"Yes. But his memory is failing a little, I think, and that may mean nothing. Don't you notice a change in him? He seems to have aged in many ways lately."

"Now, I don't agree with you," said Alison, encouragingly. "I know he thinks he's much older and weaker than he was a few weeks ago, but I can't help thinking it's more fancy than anything else. It's true he walks more feebly and that he bends more. But his eyes are just as

bright, his voice just as strong as ever. Mr. Noel, believe me, you are worrying yourself more than you need; and I dare say he worries himself more than he need, too. You see, you've all spoilt him for so long that he exaggerates every ailment and every symptom unconsciously."

Noel's face brightened a little.

"Well, perhaps he does, perhaps we all do," said he. "I'm sure I hope so. But, anyhow, I want to clear up the mystery about this snuff-box, because I don't like to think that there's a possibility that my father is being robbed, you know."

"Robbed!"

Noel little guessed the reason of the death-like pallor which spread over her face as she repeated the word. In truth, it was her fears lest Sydney, the man who had married her, should be implicated in this ugly business, which affected her so strongly.

"Yes. Don't look so frightened. You must know that my father himself has grown rather nervous about the safety of his collection of late. It was his discovery of the footmarks outside the wall on the night poor Anne Saunders was murdered that began it, of course. Now he is most careful about locking the door, and there's much more difficulty than there used to be about getting permission to see it."

"Well, I can understand that," said Alison.

"Of course. He doesn't make any secret of the reason. He says that the collection has been the

work of years, and that more damage could be done in ten minutes, even without actual theft, than could be repaired or paid for in as many years."

"I see."

"When I asked permission to go in and look at the snuff-box, he made an excuse, and said I could go when next he made an addition to his treasures."

"So you haven't found out about it yet?"

"I've come back early this afternoon on purpose to clear the matter up, though. Look here; I've just got his keys."

Alison rose from her chair in alarm.

"Not without his permission, surely!"

"Yes, without his permission. And—without his permission—I'm going to take you to the gallery, and I'm going to see whether the snuff-box is there or not."

It was in vain that she demurred, that she implored him not to make her a party to an action of which she felt sure that old Mr. Darke would strongly disapprove. If he made difficulties about allowing his own favorite son to go in and inspect his treasures, what would he say if he knew that a person who was only a paid member of his household took advantage of his absence to go and inspect them, too?

No doubt at any other time it would have been easy enough for her to silence her own scruples, since neither she nor Noel would do any harm by their clandestine visit to the gallery. But there



was a great dread hanging over her, a dread of which she could not speak, and it was that which weighed upon her spirits and made her anxious and miserable, when Noel, finally overcoming her resistance, as he was bound to do, so great was his influence over her, led her along the dark, narrow passage, unlighted except by one little round, grated, dusty window, at the end of which an iron door, securely locked, stood between them and the famous collection.

With a guilty heart she heard the key turn, and running back in its groove, the door opened, to show them yet another within.

Noel unlocked that, also, and laughed at her.

"Don't be frightened," said he. "One would think we were going to rob a bank, by the look of your face!"

"That's just how I feel," said Alison, hoarsely.

The second door opened inward, and the next moment the two intruders were in the long, lofty, darkened room.

There was a musty smell in it, which told that it had not been swept or aired very thoroughly of late, and Noel commented at once on this fact.

"He used to be always in here, showing some visitor or other his treasures. That was when he could use his limbs properly! Poor old dad! As he never lets a housemaid come in with a broom or duster without him, the room suffers directly he gets laid up!"

Already he was pointing out to her an old painting, the beauty of which she could not fully

see until he had drawn up the spring blinds which veiled the two opposite windows. Then she recognized a Reynolds of world-wide fame.

"One of the darlings of my father's heart," said Noel, smiling at the famous canvas.

From the picture Alison turned to look at the gallery itself. Most admirably adapted it was for its purpose, being lighted only from above by a row of small windows in each wall and by skylights in the roof. Both windows and skylights were protected by iron bars of great strength, and veiled by blinds which could be raised or lowered without difficulty by means of cords from the floor.

There was a range of cabinets, rare and beautiful in themselves, and full of objects of beauty and worth, down each side of the room, while in the middle was a long row of glass cases in which the smaller treasures were displayed.

Above the cabinets were the larger pictures, while between them, close to the eye, were smaller ones. At the end of the room a collection of rare and curious weapons, some very ancient and some blazing with precious stones, filled the whole of a large and specially adapted case.

While Alison took in the general impression of the gallery, Noel walked straight to the middle of the room, bent over one of the cases and uttered an exclamation.

"What is it?" cried Alison, with a vague feeling of dread.

He made no answer. He was staring down

into the case with wide-open eyes. There was a moment's dead silence. Then he raised his head, and without a word made the tour of the whole gallery, stopping now before one case and now before another, and making no sign, uttering no sound to give a clue to the emotions which possessed him. But that he was on the rack of some grave and poignant anxiety Alison well knew.

At last he stood for a few moments at the other end of the room in an attitude of profound thought. Then, turning suddenly, and appearing to become aware of her presence by an effort of the mind, he came straight toward her with compressed lips, his gray eyes alight with some strong feeling.

"I don't know," said he, in a hoarse whisper, "what to do—how to break it to my father—but the famous snuff-box is gone." Alison drew a long breath. "And not only the snuff-box." He bent down and whispered in her ear: "There are other things missing—gone. Things I remember, things I could have pointed to. The loss is not to be reckoned in hundreds, not even in thousands. He has been robbed of treasures—worth tens of thousands of pounds!"

Alison stared at him in blank despair and dismay. She could not speak.

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#### CHAPTER XIV.

THERE was a long silence, during which Noel turned away from Alison to the nearest of the

large inlaid cabinets, and began again to examine the contents with keen, scrutinizing eyes. So intent was he upon this occupation that Alison, when she had recovered her self-possession and had a question upon her lips, thought it better not to interrupt him until he spoke to her again.

Her heart ached for him. While the discovery he had made of his father's losses had come upon him with a great shock of bewilderment and surprise, she, knowing more than he did, suffered more from the knowledge of his distress than from astonishment. She had, indeed, expected some such result of his investigation.

The only surprise, in fact, for her lay in the poignancy of his feelings about what was, after all, nothing but a loss which a rich man could well bear. She had been prepared for his anger, his disgust; she had expected him to show vexation and annoyance as well as astonishment; but she was perplexed by the sort of stupefaction into which the discovery seemed to have thrown him.

She watched him as, after peering closely through the glass front of the first cabinet on the left, he hurried on to a group of miniatures which hung on the wall and examined them with extraordinary minuteness.

Wishing to distract him as well as to learn in which direction his suspicions pointed, she suddenly sprang across the floor toward him and asked, in a low voice:

"Who do you think has done this?"

And again she was shocked by the look on his face as he turned and said, abruptly:

"I don't know."

Then he turned away again, and there was another long pause, which he broke himself. Making an effort to pull himself together, he said quickly: "I suppose we ought to have been prepared for this. It's a mistake to have such a collection on the ground floor, for one thing; it's too accessible."

"Do you mean from the outside?" said she. And, glancing up at the heavily barred windows and skylights, she went on: "I should have thought it was impossible to get in anywhere except by the door."

He looked at her askance, and she guessed that he was trying to hide from her some suspicion of his own. Did she dare put it into words for him?

"Yes, yes," he said, hastily; "of course it must have been by the door they got in. Some one must have got hold of the keys. My father doesn't take half enough care of them; you see how easily I got them myself this afternoon. He thinks that all his things are sacred and that nobody would dare to touch them. But he's wrong! Poor old dad's wrong!"

"You suspect somebody? Who is it?" she asked, abruptly, in a whisper. "You can speak out, and then I'll speak out to *you*."

But Noel looked at her with a glance of alarm, and only stammered: "I—I suppose it was one of the new servants. We've had a great many,

changes among them lately, and in a large household it's impossible to guarantee the characters of them all. I myself have seen one of the men hanging about the corridor that leads to this gallery, evidently anxious to find a way in, if he could."

Alison was silent. She thought the man in question was probably Paul Penry, whose curiosity was certainly not prompted by dishonest motives. Should she tell Noel what she knew, what she guessed? How would he take the suggestion that one of his father's constant visitors and intimate friends was a scoundrel and a thief? She shrank from making the experiment.

And then suddenly there flashed into her mind a new and consoling idea. What if old Mr. Darke, who was shrewd as well as eccentric, had already discovered the depredations committed among his treasures, and himself employed Paul Penry to track the depredator? On the whole, this idea seemed a very probable one, for however much Mr. Darke might have neglected his collection of late, and however broken his health might be, it seemed to her not at all likely that he could be ignorant of losses so great as Noel reported them to be.

"Shall you suggest that to your father?"

"I don't know what I shall do," said Noel, restlessly. "To tell the truth, I dread saying anything about it to him. It almost seems to me that it would be better to say nothing, but to keep on the watch to prevent further robberies.

In the present state of his health I dread what the effect of the shock might be, while, as his memory seems to be going, I think it very possible that he may never find his losses by himself."

As he spoke, Noel, whose heavy abstraction had been succeeded by a fit of restlessness in which he seemed unable to keep still, passed her and stood with his hand upon the half-open door.

Then she made her suggestion :

"You do him injustice, I think. He doesn't seem to me like a man who is losing his memory. I think it's more likely not only that he knows all about his losses, but that he's doing his best to find out how they came about."

Noel turned to her quickly.

"How?"

"Perhaps he's put the matter into the hands of a detective," said she.

The words were hardly out of her mouth when, in the obscure recess between the two doors, she saw Paul Penry with his finger on his lip.

And in an instant she was struck into silence as if she had been turned to stone.

"Well?" said Noel, almost irritably, surprised at the sudden change in her. "What makes you think that?"

But Alison only shrugged her shoulders and tried to laugh. She dared not, in the face of that warning, say more.

"I'm a woman," she said, evasively, trying to

be flippant, "and fanciful, I suppose, like other women."

But Noel's curiosity was roused.

"I shouldn't have thought that of you," said he, earnestly, and looking her straight in the eyes, "whatever I might have thought, say, of a Lady Rosina."

Knowing as she did that everything they said was overheard, Alison answered only by a forced laugh, and moved toward the door. Noel turned to follow her, and had again begun to speak, when the door opened and Paul Penry, his face expressionless as ever, came in.

"Mr. Darke has come back, sir, and is asking for you," he said.

Quite taken by surprise by the sudden appearance of one of the servants in such an unexpected quarter, Noel hastened to relock the doors, in considerable alarm as to whether his father knew where he was.

He and Alison went down the dark corridor toward the hall, and Noel hastened to his father in the library.

While Alison was debating with herself as to what she should do, and wondering whether her guilty excursion would be found out, she heard a voice behind her, very clear, very low, uttering these words:

"Hold your tongue, you little fool, or you'll repent it!"

She knew who the warning came from, but when she turned quickly to ask a question, to



make a protest, all she saw was one of the footmen disappearing with soft and leisurely steps toward the servants' quarters.

And she knew that Paul Penry did not exist for her, as long as he remained in the house, except in the character of Wilson, the second footman.

Again she asked herself: by whose instructions was he on the watch? Was it by those of old Mr. Darke?

She remained within call for the rest of the afternoon, but Mr. Darke did not send for her again, and she dared not present herself in the library unbidden, lest she should break in upon an interview between Noel and his father.

Until dinner-time, therefore, she remained on the rack, wondering what was happening between father and son. She had already begun to find out ways of making herself useful to the ladies of the house, as she shrewdly saw that she would have to do if she wished to live comfortably under the same roof with them; and she filled up the time between tea and dinner by cleaning Carrie's paint-box and sorting Mrs. Darke's music.

When she slipped quietly into her chair at dinner she threw a frightened glance at Mr. Darke, who was already seated in his place before the rest came in. To her great relief, he gave her his usual kind smile, and, although he asked her what she had been doing with herself that afternoon, he appeared satisfied with her answer that she had been doing little things, "trifling femi-

nine things, what you would call wasting time," for Carrie and Mrs. Darke.

There was rather a large party at dinner that evening, including Lord Geldestone as well as his daughter, Captain Lansdell, the Colonel and three or four people whom Alison had never seen before.

She had been rather proud of the first appearance of her evening blouse of black net, sequined and trimmed with lace; but when she saw how persistently Noel looked at her, and how very evidently he neglected Lady Rosina, by his side, she was rather nervous and anxious to keep in the background.

There was nothing in the conversation at the dinner-table to distract her thoughts. Mrs. Darke was the ordinary middle-class hostess, more good-natured than many, quite as intelligent as most of her kind, one of those typically British hostesses, potent for mediocrity, whose presence places a weight upon the wings of thought, and in whose hearing wit and humor would be as much out of place as to be almost improper.

Lord Geldestone, too, was as typical of his own class as Mrs. Darke was of hers. Deeply imbued, almost oppressed, by a sense of his own importance, and of his condescension in appearing at this particular dinner-table, he took an intelligent interest in what he ate and drank, but woke up from a sort of stately somnolence only when the subject of roses was mentioned. On that

topic, and on that one alone, he was almost as interesting as his own head gardener.

Colonel Cressingham was, as usual, agreeable and commonplace; Carrie and Lady Rosina were talkative and flippant; Captain Lansdell was bluff and sometimes amusing; but Alison thought that on this particular occasion he was less lively than usual, and that, like the famous Scotchman, he "joked with deefficulty."

When dinner was over Alison would have made her escape into the grounds, but Mrs. Darke, who had certainly, Alison thought, been reprimanded by her husband or else warned by Carrie, and who had altered her tone in consequence, begged her to "sing or play something," adding that she was *sure* Mrs. Jarvis was musical.

As it happened, Mrs. Jarvis was not; but she did her best to satisfy these requests, and sat down to the piano, where she sang a little ballad and played a waltz just well enough to pass muster before the gentlemen came in.

Noel went straight to where she stood by the music cabinet and said, gently:

"Will you speak to me? Out in the garden, where we can be quiet?"

In a flutter of alarm at what she might have to hear, Alison, after a decent interval, made her way in a leisurely manner to the nearest window and stepped out on the lawn. She had not gone twenty paces in the direction of the river when she heard Noel behind her, and, turning at once, asked:

"Well, what did Mr. Darke say?"

Noel looked at her with an expression which she could not misunderstand; and, puzzled and frightened, she drew back a little.

"What did he say—about the collection?" she asked, more sharply.

"He said nothing at all about it, and I said nothing about it. But we both said a great deal about *you*."

"About me?" said Alison, growing cold, perplexed and bewildered.

"Yes. I told him I knew quite well your marriage could be nothing but a farce, or that you would not have come here as you have done."

Alison drew a long breath of dismay.

"And—and what did he say?" stammered she, at last.

"He said he could not imagine what reason you could have for saying you were married if you were not, and that, since you chose to say you had a husband, we were bound to accept your statement."

"Certainly. He was quite right."

"He said, also, that if you stayed here we were bound to find out the truth sooner or later."

"Of course."

"And that in the meantime I was to remember that you were a married woman by your own words, and—and, oh, he added some stuff about—about some one else."

"Lady Rosina!" suggested Alison.

"Yes. He said I must not make her jealous."

"Why did he say that?"

"I think I know. Lady Rosina, like a sensible woman, has begun to see that we are wholly unsuited to each other, and I have an idea that my people are anxious to make her jealous again."

Alison drew herself up.

"They shall not succeed in that, at any rate," said she. "I don't understand why I was made to come here, and I can't believe it was for such a silly reason. But I do know that I'm not at all comfortable or happy, and if you suddenly find that I've gone away, you need be neither alarmed nor surprised."

"That's just what I told my father, and I added that if you did disappear I should disappear, too."

Alison stared at him with wide eyes.

"How dare you say such a thing—about me?" she gasped, at last.

"It's true. I'm not happy about you, I'm not satisfied about you. And if you go away again, I shall never rest till I've hunted you out, tracked you down, and found out the truth about your marriage, and about you."

Alison was trembling. She saw that Noel's passion had made him discerning, and that it was of no use to go on repeating the story of her marriage, when his instinct told him that, whatever the exact facts about it might be, the tie which bound her was a nominal one only. There was only one course open—to be straightforward and to appeal to his honor.

So she, holding her hands lightly clasped together, looked up into his face in the dying daylight, and said, simply:

"You will find out nothing, please. I rely upon your honor not to do so, but to take my word and ask no questions. Remember—how I've trusted you—remember, and justify my trust."

Her straightforward honesty had its effect at once. It stemmed the rising torrent of the young man's passion and brought him back at once to his best self.

"God bless you! I remember. You—you shan't have to speak to me again," said he, hoarsely, under his breath.

And with that, and with one wistful, glowing look, he turned away, leaving her with her heart yearning to comfort him, and with hands and teeth tightly clenched, holding herself vigorously to the right way.

She began dimly now to see why she had been made to come back to Riverscourt. If she had not come, Noel would have gone away in search of her, or at least to escape the family demands. She was the bait by which they had held him to his home!

With such thoughts as these struggling with reflections on the mystery that hung over the place, Alison did not find the time hang on her hands. So interesting were all these matters, indeed, that she could not sleep that night when she retired to her room, but, opening one of the

windows, sat by it hour after hour, until she began to see the first faint light of dawn upon the tree-tops.

And when she saw that she saw another light playing on the tree-tops, also—a faint, flickering illumination, which made her wonder where it came from. Putting her head out of the window, Alison became aware that the flickering light came through the drawn blinds of the windows of the gallery, and she knew that some one must be inside.

She had not even exchanged her dress for her dressing-gown, so she rose softly from her chair, crossed the floor, opened her door, glided down the stairs, crossed the hall and into the dark corridor that led to the room where the famous collection was kept.

Her heart was beating very fast, for she felt that she might be on the verge of a great discovery. Without making the least noise, she reached the end of the corridor, but, although she found the outer door of the gallery ajar, she did not dare venture further, but listened, and assured herself that some one was moving about rapidly within the long room. She heard the opening and shutting of cases and cabinets, she heard quick steps from end to end of the long room. At last she put her hand on the inner door; it gave way under her touch with a slight noise.

She had only just time to see the slit of faint light, which showed that the door was not shut,

when the person within sprang across and slammed the door in her very face.

She stepped back, pale and shivering, into the corridor, but she did not go away.

For a long time she waited, and presently she heard the sound of the door softly opening. She had made up her mind what to do, and she crouched in the corner, waiting.

She heard the door open and shut; she heard the second door open. The darkness was absolute; she could see nothing. But just as the second door was shutting she stretched out her hand, and, having ascertained exactly where the key-hole was, she drew the pin of her brooch sharply across the hand that was turning the key at the very moment when the grating sound told her that the locking was taking place.

Whether it was a man or a woman whose hand she thus scarred she could not tell, and no sound escaped her victim's lips.

A moment later she heard some one running rapidly down the corridor, and after a short pause she staggered out into the hall in her turn.

No one was there. The gray light was beginning to steal in through the windows and over the door, making the marble of the floor look sickly and cold. She stole shivering to her room, with but one thought in her mind: to-morrow there would be a scarred hand in the house, and she would know who had been in the gallery that night.



## CHAPTER XV.

IN the meantime Alison could not rest. It was all very well to tell herself that in the morning she would know who the midnight visitor to the gallery was, that she would by breakfast-time have solved the mystery, and would have learned the identity of the thief who was gradually despoiling Mr. Darke's precious collection.

But experience had by this time proved that the Riverscourt tragedy was a complicated one, and she was by no means sure that the culprit in the murder and in the shooting outrage was the same person who was responsible for the disappearance of Mr. Darke's treasures.

And again her thoughts fastened upon Swithin, the unpopular, the disagreeable Swithin; and she asked herself why it was that he had disappeared, and that nothing was said about him by any member of the household.

Was he the lunatic of whom she had heard? Had he been confined in an asylum, and was it during one of his lucid intervals that she had met him on the occasion of her first visit to Riverscourt?

On the whole, this seemed a not unlikely supposition; it would account for so many apparent inconsistencies in the stories she had heard.

Naturally the family would not like to have it known that one of its members was not only a

lunatic, but a criminal; and it would be easier to have the matter hushed up, if it were really an irresponsible person who caused the death of the poor girl, than if the crime had been committed by a sane man.

Not only had Swithin disappeared, but nobody mentioned him, nobody seemed to miss him. It seemed highly probable to Alison, therefore, that he had been shut up again, as he had probably been shut up before, and that there was a tacit agreement among the family and the family's friends to ignore his existence.

But this would not account for the disappearance of the treasures of Mr. Darke's collection, nor for the presence of a nocturnal visitor in the gallery.

If Mr. Darke himself had chosen, as an enthusiast might well choose, to inspect his treasures by himself when the rest of the household were asleep, he could not have gone about from case to case without help; while the intruder she had heard was a particularly active and agile person, whose footsteps could be heard on the parquet flooring as he went rapidly from end to end of the long room. And the legitimate owner of the collection would have been neither anxious to remain unseen nor capable of running away.

In her own mind Alison decided that the person she had heard would prove to be either Paul Penry or Colonel Cressingham.

There were difficulties in the way of either supposition, indeed. In the first place, the men-

servants did not sleep in the house itself, but over the stables, from which they came each morning by a covered bridge into the house as soon as the door, which cut off communication at night, was unlocked by the housekeeper in the morning. In the second place, how could he have obtained possession of Mr. Darke's keys?

Colonel Cressingham, on the other hand, was staying in the house itself, on the same floor as Mr. Darke; and suddenly it flashed into her mind as probable that he and Sydney Jarvis might be in collusion, and that it might be with the Colonel that Sydney had dealings, and not with Mr. Darke himself at all. She had never seen Sydney and Mr. Darke together, and it seemed possible that the former accepted the Colonel as Mr. Darke's agent, and that, while the Colonel was quietly abstracting such small things as the snuff-box and disposing of them to Sydney, the latter believed that he was buying them from or selling them for Mr. Darke himself.

If, however, it should prove that no one in the house had a scarred hand, then Alison decided that it would be to the absent Swithin that she must look as the author of this further outrage, and that in that case she must find an opportunity of communicating with Paul Penry.

When, trembling with excitement, she went downstairs on the following morning, the very first person Alison met was Paul Penry, who was crossing the hall with a tray in his hands.

She was able to see both his hands, and to

satisfy herself absolutely that it was not across his fingers that she had drawn her brooch.

With her heart beating very fast, she went on toward the breakfast-room, feeling now almost certain that she would find the mark of her brooch-pin on the right hand of Colonel Cressingham.

She had scarcely reached the door, however, when the Colonel himself, coming up quickly from behind, said, "Allow me," and opened the door for her with a right hand as sound and unscratched as her own. She felt the blood rushing to her face as she greeted him, and was careful to inspect his left hand, too, as she did so. But the result was the same—neither upon his left hand nor upon his right was there the slightest mark of any injury.

So thoroughly had she become convinced in her own mind that the Colonel would prove to be the culprit that Alison now began to ask herself whether he had had gloves on when she drew her brooch-pin across his hand in the darkness. But in the first place, this seemed very unlikely, and in the second, she remembered her sensations at the moment, and was sure that what she touched when she made her feminine assault was a human hand, a large hand, a man's hand. And that she had scarred it deeply, so deeply that it must have bled, she was sure.

Was Swithin, then, the culprit?

This question was in her mind as she entered the breakfast-room, and it was with astonish-

ment which almost made her feel ill, so keen and unexpected was the sensation, that, on catching sight of Captain Lansdell, who was already seated at the table, she saw that his right hand was gloved.

For a few moments she could not collect her thoughts. That the genial, jovial friend of the family, who always appeared to be the most light-hearted and irresponsible member of the party, should be in any way connected with the ugly mystery which hung over Riverscourt, was a surprise so great as to be almost unnerving.

Before she had recovered from the shock Alison found herself face to face with a most strange coincidence. As she advanced up the room to where Mr. Darke sat in his usual seat at the table she saw that his hand was not held out to her as usual with a kindly greeting, but that he was wearing it in a sling and bandage against his breast.

His voice was as cheery as ever as he called out to her:

"Don't be frightened! I've not had my arm amputated. The gout, my old enemy, has got me in its clutches; that's all."

At any other time Alison would have had more self-control than to stop short and turn pale, as she now did. But the coincidence of finding two persons each with a bandaged right hand, when she had been looking for some such sign of injury in quite a different direction, was too much for her self-possession. She was conscious, too, that

there was something unusually stern and grave in Mr. Darke's expression as he looked at her; and the thought uppermost in her mind, amidst the confusion of suspicions and fancies which jostled each other in her brain, was that he knew she had been prying into matters which did not concern her, and that he was justly displeased.

Indeed, as breakfast went on, this was the view she began to take of her own conduct. After all, what concern was it of hers whether other people visited the gallery in the night or not? Whatever Noel's theories or her own suspicions might be, neither he nor she knew anything to justify them in saying that thieves were at work amidst Mr. Darke's collection.

Mr. Darke was not bound to take his family into his confidence about every sale or purchase; while, on the other hand, it suddenly occurred to her that he might have discovered that his keys had been taken away on the previous day, and that he might have sent his friend Captain Lansdell to examine the cases at night, immediately on his discovery, to ascertain whether anything had been tampered with.

And this view of the case seemed to be partly confirmed by the stern way in which Mr. Darke looked at herself. What if he should think that it was she who had taken his keys without permission on the previous day and should doubt her honesty?

The thought was a terrible one. And not less hard to bear was the idea that he guessed her to

be the person who had injured Captain Lansdell's hand.

For, though at one moment Alison asked herself whether it were, after all, Mr. Darke himself and not Captain Lansdell whose hand she had scarred, she remembered the next moment the rapid footsteps and the hurried disappearance.

Now, Mr. Darke could not walk unaided, and he could not run at all.

Despair made Alison bold. Mr. Darke had no need of her services at the typewriter that morning, so she deliberately resolved to play the spy upon Captain Lansdell, to watch him about, and to see whether he showed any signs of pain in the right hand.

But she had few opportunities of doing this, for quite early he declared his intention of running up to town to lunch with a friend in Piccadilly, and soon after eleven his motor-car was at the door.

Alison was in the grounds, and she saw Penry bring out the Captain's luggage and pack it away in the car. Suspicious and well on the alert, she also noticed that he was taking back to town more luggage than he had brought with him on the previous day. For one thing, he had a long, rolled-up, thin parcel, which looked as if it might be a picture; and again the girl asked herself as he drove away whether Mr. Darke had chosen his friends unwisely in more cases than one.

When she heard Noel's voice behind her she uttered a cry of relief and joy which surprised

and delighted him. Without thinking what she said, she cried, as she turned toward him:

"Oh, Noel, is it you? I'm so glad!"

The next moment she drew back, recalled to herself by the flush in his cheeks and the light in his eyes, and tried to laugh.

"Don't spoil it by saying you're not glad, after all," said he, eagerly. "First thoughts are best, first impressions are truest."

She had recovered herself, and now said, quickly:

"Yes, and my first thought was to tell you that I've got myself into a terrible scrape, or else that I'm on the verge of a terrible discovery."

"What!"

"There was some one in the gallery last night. I went into the corridor and heard steps moving quickly about inside; but whoever was there heard me and extinguished the light."

"Well?"

"So I waited outside the door, crouching in the corner at the end of the corridor. And when I heard the door open I scratched the hand that turned the key to lock it. Captain Lansdell is wearing a glove this morning!"

She poured out her story breathlessly, and then paused, watching his face. Noel was pale and very grave.

"You might as well say it was my father you heard," said he, at last. "His hand is bound up, too."

Alison shook her head.



"I could swear it was not he. I tell you I heard the man's footsteps walking quickly about the room, very quickly. And when he came out, after I had drawn my brooch-pin across his hand, he ran—yes, *ran* away, like the wind!"

Noel was frowning in perplexity and dismay.

"I couldn't take it upon myself to bring an accusation against another of his friends," said he. "I did mention some days ago that I had heard stories about the Colonel, and I got well snubbed for my pains."

"Oh, what—what did he say?"

"He said that his friends were sacred to him, and they must be sacred to his children, and that an aspersion cast upon one of them was an aspersion upon himself. He was very grave, very dignified, but very angry; and he made me feel thoroughly ashamed of myself."

Alison sighed.

"Of course, the same thing would happen if you were to say anything about the Captain! But am I unjust or unduly suspicious? He was taking a great deal more luggage away this morning than he brought with him yesterday, wasn't he?"

Noel's face became suddenly red and his eyes gleamed angrily.

"Please remember that you're speaking of one of my father's friends, one of *our* friends! Surely you don't take them for a gang of thieves!"

"Oh, don't, don't!" cried the poor girl, much

shocked. "Remember it was you, not I, who said there were things missing from the collection!"

Noel was deep in thought for a few moments, and then he turned to her, as gentle and tender as ever.

"Forgive me," said he. "Consider what a dreadful position this is, and you will, I know. I couldn't suspect the Captain. I don't suppose he's ever in his life done anything worse than swear at the middies on board his ship. We all love him, and would as soon suspect ourselves of doing anything wrong as suspect him!"

Alison burst into tears.

"If you knew how I feel," she sobbed. "I wish I had never come here. I brought evil upon this place from the very first. It was I who had to tell the dreadful story of the drowning of the poor girl, and I've been concerned in whatever of harm or of wrong has been done here ever since. If I hadn't come you would have married Lady Rosina. Oh, don't contradict me; you know you would, and all would have gone well!"

"What do you mean by saying that? By connecting Lady Rosina with all this?" stammered Noel, puzzled and much troubled by her distress and by her wild words. "It has nothing whatever to do with you or with her. It is only a chance—a most unhappy chance—that you should be in any way mixed up with these wretched affairs. We seem to be pursued by a demon of ill luck of late, but don't think—you

musn't think—that you are to blame in any way whatever."

Alison dried her eyes and tried to regain her composure. There was one question she wanted to ask, but dared not. Where was Swithin? She felt that it would clear up everything satisfactorily, or at least as satisfactorily as was possible, if it could be proved that the eldest son was insane, and that he had committed the mysterious crimes in question when in a state in which he could not be held responsible for his actions. Yet, in the face of Noel's reception of her suspicions of the Captain, who was only a friend, how could she proceed to make suspicious inquiries about a man who was a near relation?

Her courage failed her and she left the question unasked.

In the meantime Noel had been considering the matter in silence, and a sudden gesture on his part showed her that he had come to a decision of some sort.

"What are you going to do?" whispered she.

There was a firm look about the lines of his mouth as he stood in front of her in the warm sunshine, in a nook between the yews and the graceful birches, and his first words showed her that he meant to proceed energetically with the matter.

"I'm going to watch myself," said he, "every night, till I find out who the intruder is. But I think I *know*."

She looked at him curiously, but dared frame no question.

"It's the man who was at the bottom of the other business," he said, in a low voice. "How he can have got in I don't know, but I'll find out. In the meantime don't say anything to anybody, and don't worry your head any more by such absurd fancies as you've been indulging in."

He smiled kindly into her face, and, comforted, though still somewhat perturbed, she went indoors and made what excuses she could for her absence from the house, where she had been wanted by Mr. Darke.

The Captain did not return that day, and a whole week passed without any incident of note. Alison kept out of the way of the ladies as much as she could, though they were now at least civil to her on all occasions. She had little to do for Mr. Darke, whose gout troubled him a good deal, and necessitated his spending a day or two in his room in the doctor's hands. Colonel Cressingham came and went as usual, and the Captain came down for one night only.

All this time Noel said little to her about the matter which was weighing upon their minds, but she guessed that he was keeping his word, and saw, indeed, by the increasing pallor of his face that he was holding midnight vigils as he intended.

Then at the end of the week a crisis came.

She was startled out of her sleep one night by a cry, by yet another; and by the time she had

sprung across the floor and unlocked the door she was conscious that there was a scuffle of some sort going on below.

It was over almost as soon as it began, and dead silence followed. She ran downstairs and met other members of the household asking questions, too. But nothing more was to be heard and nothing was to be seen; so they retreated to their rooms again, and it was not till morning came that Alison heard anything further.

Then she met Carrie crying on the stairs as she came down.

"Oh, Mrs. Jarvis, have you heard?" sobbed she. "Noel—poor Noel's very, very ill. They—they don't think he'll live. Isn't it—isn't it—dreadful?"

But Alison could not answer; she felt as if turned to stone.

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## CHAPTER XVI.

"WE'VE had nothing but misfortune and worry here lately! It doesn't seem like the same place that it used to be!" moaned Carrie.

Alison had by this time got back her voice.

"What has happened to him, then?" she said, brokenly.

"To Noel? Oh, I don't exactly know. But he's very ill—some accident has happened to him.

I can't get anybody to tell me quite what it was. But the doctor's with him now, I believe."

This was all Alison could learn until she reached the breakfast-room, where she found neither Mr. nor Mrs. Darke, but only the Colonel, who was looking pale and harassed, and who was more than usually silent during breakfast.

It was not until two hours later that Alison, who had been walking up and down outside the house in a state bordering on frenzy, was called to the study, where Mr. Darke was waiting for her.

She saw at once by the expression of his face that he was not only suffering acute distress of mind, but that he was in an angry mood. At the risk of offending him, Alison at once asked what it was that had happened to Noel.

At the question he turned in his chair and faced her so angrily that she knew he considered her implicated in the unhappy affair.

"I believe," he said, with frigidity which amounted to sternness, "that he was disturbed in the night by some noise, went downstairs in pursuit of an imaginary burglar, and slipped on the floor of the hall. The result is that he has concussion of the brain, and that the consequences may be dangerous, if not fatal, to him if he is not kept very quiet."

Now, Alison knew that this could not be an exact account of what had happened, for on hearing the noise in the night she had gone down into the hall, where, if Noel had fallen as described,

she would certainly have found him. But she remembered that Mr. Darke could not have seen what had occurred, and that he had to be content with the account given by others. She, therefore, asked no more questions, refrained from mentioning the little she herself knew of the affair, and set about her morning's work with heavy heart and dim eyes.

Mr. Darke, although he dictated his letters with his usual care, betrayed by a certain restlessness of eye and by occasional fits of abstraction that he was not his usual self. Both were glad when the morning's work was over, though Alison found she had to face another ordeal when she reached the morning-room.

Lady Rosina was there, crying and bemoaning the accident to Noel, while Mrs. Darke, who was trying to comfort her, was not only uneasy and anxious, but irritable, and she vented her irritability upon Alison.

"I don't know how it is," she said, almost as soon as the typewriter girl was in the room, "but we've had nothing but ill luck since you first come here, Mrs. Jarvis. Of course, I don't mean to say that you were the cause of this accident to Noel, but it's very extraordinary that nothing should have gone right since we've known you."

These unkind and petulant words coincided so exactly with what Alison herself was thinking that instead of resenting them she burst into tears. The three other ladies were mollified and

rather perturbed by this, especially when Alison sobbed out:

"It's quite true. I've been thinking the same thing myself. Would you like me to go away?"

There was a moment of awe-struck silence. Then Mrs. Darke said, hurriedly:

"Oh, no, oh, no. I'm sorry I said what I did—very sorry. Of course, we know it's not your fault, and——"

"But if I feel just as you do, wouldn't it be better——"

Mrs. Darke would not let her finish.

"Don't say any more about it," she said, hurriedly. Of course, it was very wrong for me to say what I did, very thoughtless. I'm sure you would rather go away; but when I suggested it to Mr. Darke——"

Alison looked up quickly.

"You did suggest it?" said she.

Poor Mrs. Darke looked confused.

"I—I mean—well, I did say I thought you'd feel uncomfortable here, after the series of accidents we've had. But he was very angry, and said that you were to stay, if everybody in the house got concussion of the brain. And you know that he must always have his own way, no matter what happens."

Alison experienced one of those sensations of bewilderment and surprise to which, during her stay at Riverscourt, she had grown accustomed. Why should Mr. Darke insist upon her staying? Her services were not so invaluable as all that!



And, however great his partiality for her had been at the outset, she had seemed to detect a great change in the way he looked at her that morning.

If, as Noel had suggested, Mr. Darke had brought her to Riverscourt in order to keep him there, this reason could no longer have weight with him, since the poor fellow was at present too ill to move.

There was silence for some moments after Mrs. Darke's speech, and Alison, drying her eyes, stared out at the lawn and the trees with a face full of the bewilderment she felt.

"Is he conscious?" asked Lady Rosina, at last, in a quavering voice.

"Not all the time," answered Mrs. Darke. "He lies muttering to himself, always the same thing—your name, nothing but your name."

In the midst of her distress Alison felt a sudden inclination to laugh, so palpably was this a fiction. Whatever name poor Noel might utter, it would not be that of Lady Rosina; or, if he did mention her, it would not be in terms that the lady would care to hear. So restive had he been of late under the family attempts to drag him to the feet of Lord Geldestone's daughter that it had come to be tacitly agreed upon to suppress all mention of her name and to try other and subtler means to bring about the desired result.

Lady Rosina, however, was, of course, unaware of this, and she now received this intelligence from the sick-room with becoming modest satis-

faction, sighing and saying that she would come and see him at the earliest moment allowed, and that they were to tell him so.

"I will, dear, indeed I will," said Mrs. Darke, fervently. "It will help him to get well to know that."

Lady Rosina stayed to luncheon, and it was announced by the time the meal was over that the invalid was better and that he was sleeping quietly.

"Have the nurses come yet?" asked Lady Rosina.

Mrs. Darke shrugged her shoulders slightly and glanced at her husband.

Mr. Darke answered the question.

"We are not going to have any professional nurses in the house, if it can be helped," said he. "I dislike them as a class. They give a great deal of trouble, put on a lot of airs, and invariably think themselves and their comfort of more consequence than the patient."

Mrs. Darke looked furtively at Lady Rosina, who was much surprised.

"But when it's so serious," she urged, and Alison felt grateful to her for her energetic intervention, "I should have thought all ideas of your own convenience would give way! Of course, one knows that these nurses chatter——"

"Oh, it's not that," interrupted Mrs. Darke, hastily. "There's nothing for them to chatter about, you know."

In spite of herself, it was evident that Lady

Rosina could not repress a look which implied that she thought otherwise. Indeed, this was so obvious that youthful, indiscreet Carrie commented on the fact.

"Don't you think there is, mother?" she said. "Now, I think there has been a lot to talk about here lately."

This unlucky speech caused a moment's awkward pause at the luncheon-table, and Colonel Cressingham came to the rescue with an obviously dragged-in question about Lord Geldestone's roses.

"Oh, by-the-bye," said Lady Rosina. "My father told me to ask you, Mrs. Darke, whether you would all come in to dinner to-night, so as to keep the house quiet for poor Noel."

Mrs. Darke flushed with pleasure, and, though they all knew that the invitation did not come spontaneously from the earl, but that it had been forced from him by his daughter, it was accepted eagerly, as it was rightly considered that an informal invitation like this "meant more" than a dozen formal ones.

To Alison's surprise, therefore—for she considered that they ought all to have been too much occupied with Noel's illness to be able to go out to dinner—it was agreed that the whole party should walk across the grounds that evening to Lord Geldestone's place and dine there.

"You will go, too, I suppose, Mrs. Jarvis?" said Carrie to Alison, as they left the table.

"Certainly I should not, in any case," said

Alison, concisely. "And I don't even understand how you can go, when your brother is lying dangerously ill."

"Oh, well, you know, the Geldestones are not like strangers. We look upon them as belonging to the family, as they will do some day," replied the young girl, confidently.

Alison thought that the wish was father to the thought, but made no comment, and was very glad to have the evening to herself, as she supposed that she would do.

But when she had finished her solitary dinner, which was served in the breakfast-room without much ceremony, she met the housekeeper in the hall, and saw at once by her face that something had happened.

"Will you come up to Mr. Noel's room, Mrs. Jarvis?" asked the housekeeper, in a voice full of concern. "He's getting so restless, I don't like the responsibility of nursing him all by myself. You know," she went on, in a lower voice, "they won't have any one in to help, because Mr. Darke hates gossip about his household; but, really, if I have to call in one of the housemaids to help me, that's worse than having to trust a professional nurse, isn't it? So I thought I might ask you—I know *you* wouldn't chatter, ma'am, whatever you might hear!"

"You may trust me, Mrs. Brander," said Alison, as she followed the elder woman upstairs, wondering, however, what the Darkes would have

said had they known the choice of an assistant which the housekeeper had made.

When they reached the sick-room, where Noel was lying in bed, muttering to himself, a frightened maid, who had been left in charge, came quickly toward them from the chair where she had been sitting.

"I'm so glad you've come! I don't half like staying with him. Once he sprang up and glared at me as if he would have choked me! And he said, 'You!—You!' as if I'd been a ghost!"

"He didn't know it was you, be sure," said Mrs. Brander. "He's not quite himself, and he took you for some one else!"

"I dare say! But you don't catch me sitting with him again!" retorted the maid, glancing fearfully at the restless patient.

Alison, with an aching pain at her heart, had by this time approached the bed. Noel turned his eyes upon her, but it was evident that he did not know her. He lay for a few moments without speaking, and then, springing up, he glared into her face and whispered:

"My God! Not you—*you*! What does it mean?"

Trembling, she tried to soothe him, knowing well that the words referred to some sight he had witnessed, some experience he had gone through, just previous to the accident which had caused his illness.

"Hush!" she said. "It's all right now. Lie

down quietly and forget all about it. There, there, lie quietly."

Her words seemed to have no effect upon him, but when she placed her hand upon his head and smoothed the bed-clothes, which he had clutched and tumbled, she fancied that he presently felt the influence of the tender touch, of the loving presence. She liked to think so. And the house-keeper, with tears in her old eyes, whispered, presently:

"I thought he'd mind you, ma'am; I felt sure he would!"

"Yes, but the family won't be so pleased," Alison whispered back.

Mrs. Brander shrugged her shoulders.

"The family must take its chance," said she. "I shall do the best for the poor young gentleman while I can, whatever happens. Now, I want to leave you here a little while. You won't be frightened, will you? If you want any help, just touch the bell."

"I shan't want any," said Alison, quietly.

Indeed, she felt, as she sat by the bed, with her hand on poor Noel's unconscious head, as if she could have sat thus forever, so full of sweetness mingled with the pain were the sensations which filled her heart.

When she was alone with him he lay for some time with his eyes closed, so that she was not sure whether he was asleep or awake. She was startled to hear a hoarse whisper near her ear:

"Alison, do you know?"

She turned, and saw a momentary look of recognition in his eyes. But the next moment it had faded out of them, and he sprang up in bed and fought with her restraining arms, crying:

“Who are you? Who are you, I say?”

Addressing him by name, and using every tender inflection of her voice, while she used all her muscular strength to hold him down, she succeeded at last in calming him somewhat and in inducing him to lie down again. But during the struggle she trod on something hard and sharp, and when her patient was quiet again she stooped to see what it was.

A beautiful enameled plaque, in a fanciful silver-gilt setting, lay on the floor half under the bed. As she picked it up she saw that it had fallen out of a large brown leather bag that lay, half-open, under the bed. And with a sudden spasm of not unjustifiable curiosity she dragged the bag out and looked into it.

She was more shocked than surprised to find that it contained, roughly packed between handfuls of shavings and crushed newspaper, enamels, curious jewels, an engraved casket, some miniatures and a handful of uncut precious stones.

She knew that these things were all spoils from the famous collection, and her only wonder was how they came into their present hiding-place. That her unhappy patient had no hand in conveying them thither she felt sure, unless, indeed, he had taken the bag from the hands of the still

unidentified depredator whom he had undoubtedly encountered on the previous night, and who was, as undoubtedly, the man who, by a blow, had caused his illness.

Alison thrust the bag back under the bed with a trembling hand. What was the meaning of this fresh discovery? Nothing further was to be learned at that time from the lips of Noel, for he had fallen into a sleep which, though somewhat broken, was quiet and restful compared to the state in which he had lain on her first coming.

She was still watching him, and still turning over in her own mind the discovery of the bag, when she heard a sound which told her that some one was approaching the door from the staircase, which was only a few feet away.

It was not Mrs. Brander's step, and, by a sudden impulse, Alison resolved to hide herself and to see what the newcomer would do, whoever he might be.

So she rose from her chair by the bedside and concealed herself behind the little bed-curtain which hung from a swinging rod at the head of the bed on the side furthest from the door.

The door opened softly and Colonel Cressingham came in.

He went up to the bed, looked at Noel, and then, stooping down, drew out from its hiding-place the bag with its treasures, and moved quickly toward the door.



## CHAPTER XVII.

ALL this time Noel never stirred. Colonel Cressingham, indeed, made but little noise as he drew out the bag and went toward the door with it; but the floor creaked a little under his tread, and Alison wondered whether the patient had really fallen asleep again, or whether he was listening to the intruder or watching his movements.

The Colonel stopped when he reached the door and looked back toward the bed with a searching, keen look. Then he looked again at the bag in his hand, and, after appearing to hesitate for a moment, he went out of the room, leaving the door ajar.

For Alison, this was sufficient indication that he meant to come back, and she therefore remained in her hiding-place and, keeping as still as she could, waited for the return she felt sure would not be long delayed.

Was Noel asleep? It looked like it, but she could not be sure.

The minutes passed so slowly that they seemed like hours; then, as she had expected, the door was pushed softly open and the Colonel came in again. He had got rid of his bag, and now sauntered in, with his cigarette case in hand, looking so handsome, so well-bred, in his perfectly fitting dress clothes, that Alison, in spite of all she

knew and all she guessed, began again to hesitate, to doubt, to ask herself whether this gentle-looking, fair-haired, well-groomed man could have the sinister intentions of which she was ready to suspect him.

The only thing about him which gave the slightest color to her ugly suspicions was a certain alertness which appeared in his face only now and then, and for a couple of seconds, but which was in contrast to the usual calm coolness of his look and behavior.

She had, during his absence from the room, made herself a pinhole in the curtain large enough to watch him by.

He stood for some moments in the middle of the floor, with his eyes on his patient, and his cigarette-case in his hand. Then he came a step nearer, and put the little silver case in his pocket, and began to draw up his cuffs and his coat-sleeves.

Whether Alison shook the curtain which hid her she did not know, but the Colonel suddenly looked in her direction and took a few brisk steps to the bottom of the bed.

He had scarcely done so when she came boldly out and said:

"What are you going to do to Noel, Colonel Cressingham?"

If she thought to disconcert him by this daring question, she had made a mistake. He pushed his cuffs further up and said:

"I was wondering whether it would not be wise

to bathe his head with vinegar and cold water to keep down his temperature."

"We may leave it to the doctor to suggest that, I think," said Alison, coldly.

The Colonel drew down his cuffs again with a slight shrug.

"Very well," said he. "If you don't think it necessary, it can be left till he comes. But I can assure you that out in India I had as much experience in affairs of this kind as many a medical man."

"Affairs of *this* kind?" repeated Alison, sarcastically.

The Colonel looked at her. Through the drawn curtains there came only just enough of the dying daylight for her to be able to see his face, but not enough for him to see hers, standing as she did with her back to the windows.

"What do you mean?" said he, very quietly.

"I mean that I'm sure you have not had much experience so strange as this, that a man should be attacked at night in his father's own house, in the attempt to protect his father's property."

The Colonel, still arranging his cuffs, looked at her steadily. She thought she detected a look of satisfaction in his cold blue eyes, but was not sure of this.

"I don't know myself exactly what did happen last night," he said, at last, in a bland manner. "Perhaps you can tell me."

She saw at once that she had made a strategic mistake of some kind, that she had betrayed too

much or too little. She hesitated, therefore, to commit herself further, and after waiting a short time, with an elaborate air of ostentatious courtesy, the Colonel went on:

"Of course, I've heard that some one made an attempt to abstract some things from the gallery, and that young Darke was hurt by a blow on the head. It was to that injury I referred when I said I'd had experience."

Alison glanced at the patient, who was lying with his eyes closed as before. She wondered whether he was really unconscious, or whether he heard their conversation. The Colonel, she was sure, wondered, too.

"It's a great pity," he went on, "that this should have happened. I don't mean merely that a blow on the head is an undesirable thing, but that the affair gets talked about and distorted and worked up into a scandal, very undesirable in the interests of everybody. I have an idea that Mr. Darke would rather have submitted to the theft of half his collection than have this beastly row."

As Alison had by this time little doubt in her own mind that the Colonel was the man with whom Noel had had the midnight tussle, she quite understood his wish that the matter should be hushed up. She was not surprised, therefore, when, receiving no answer to this remark, he presently said:

"Oh, by-the-bye, I was forgetting that I had a message for you. Lord Geldestone and Lady

Rosina were much disappointed that you didn't come to dinner with us, and I was particularly to ask you to go round to their place at once, and to bring some songs with you, if you would."

Alison had no doubt whatever that this message was an invented one, and she answered at once:

"Thank you. Please thank them for me. But I can't go away. I don't intend to leave Noel."

"Have you been asked to nurse him?" said the Colonel, rather sharply.

"No."

"Do you think you can be of more use than Mrs. Brander?"

"Yes."

The Colonel grew impatient.

"Do you think Mr. and Mrs. Darke would approve of your nursing their son?"

Then Alison met his eyes with a look which was a challenge.

"Yes, I think they would, if I were to tell them why."

His eyes fell. There was an expression on his face which told her that she was right to beware of him.

"Very well," said he, turning to the door, "I'll tell them you refuse to come."

And he went out without another look, shutting the door behind him.

She crossed the room quickly and listened to his footsteps as he went downstairs; then she went to the window and watched him cross the

lawn in the direction of Lord Geldestone's place. As she turned from the window with a sigh of relief she was startled to find Noel sitting up in bed and staring at her in such a way that for a moment she was not sure whether he knew her or not. The expression upon his face was one of deep, unspeakable misery.

His first words opened her eyes.

"Alison, you have no business here. You must go away—at once."

She came slowly toward him and tried to speak in the ordinary sick-nurse voice, low-pitched, gentle, but cheerful.

"Yes, yes, I will go. I'm only here for a few minutes. Now, you must lie down quietly."

He obeyed at once, but pointed to the door, and repeated, in a low voice, as if saying a lesson:

"You must go away. You've done too much already."

He was staring up at her with hollow eyes of distress and pain. She felt that she must have an explanation.

"How—too much?" she asked, gently.

"You've kept that scoundrel's hands off me," answered Noel, steadily. "If you hadn't been here he'd have strangled me. I saw what he was going to do—saw it in his hands, in his eyes."

"Hush!" said Alison, shocked, but not amazed, by these words.

The same thought, not quite so definite, not quite so clear, had passed through her own mind

when she saw the Colonel's large, white hands pushing back his coat-sleeves.

"Hush! Why should he do it?" she added, under her breath.

Noel's brows contracted with a frown of pain.

"Oh, well, I know why," he said. "As for you, you needn't know, and you needn't believe me unless you like. There's only one thing you must do, and that is—go away. Don't shake your head—I insist."

"It's of no use. I'm going to stay. The Colonel won't want to strangle *me*."

"And he won't want to serve me that way, either, now."

"Why not?"

"Because he found out from what you said that I hadn't let out something that he thought I had."

"What was that?" asked Alison, coming nearer and speaking in a whisper. "But you needn't tell me; I can guess. It was he who struck you on the head last night! It was he who stole the things. You need not try to deny it. Remember, I saw him take away the bag just now."

"Well, then, be satisfied with what you know and what you can guess, and be a good girl and go away. I tell you, your staying here frightens me, worries me, makes me ill. Remember, I'm not quite myself yet. I shall be wandering again presently, I expect, saying things I'd rather not say, and that I don't want you to hear."

"Better that I should hear them than that any one else should."

He looked earnestly into her face.

"No, no, it isn't," said he, in a passionate whisper, "because any one else might not understand—and *you would!* Oh, go, go, there's a dear, good child, go! Come, you owe me that for what I feel for you, and for the little I say!"

The tears were rolling down her cheeks. The pity of it was that even as he spoke it seemed to her that he was losing ground before her eyes, that his voice was growing weaker, his gaze losing its keenness, his tongue beginning to hesitate, his mind to wander.

"Noel," she whispered, "Noel." The voice seemed to help him to call back for a moment his sinking consciousness. "Don't be afraid, and don't send me away. I promise that, whatever I hear, it shall be as if I had not heard."

He understood, and a faint gleam in his dim eyes thanked her as he fell back on the pillow, breathing heavily.

The next moment his mind was wandering again, and he asked why the blinds were down, and whether Anne Saunders was really dead.

Alison sat again by the bedside, and answered all his questions, wild as they were, as if they had been asked in full consciousness. She had an idea that he half-understood that it was she who was speaking, and that the touch of her hand soothed him.

But presently there fell from his lips words so startling that her tongue faltered, and she could say nothing, could do nothing but stare at the



unconscious man with eyes wide with terror and dismay.

She hung over the bedside, glancing from time to time nervously at the door, and wondering whether others besides herself had heard these rambling speeches of his, and had understood them as she did.

And while she listened, and looked and wondered, there came a soft step to the door, and the housekeeper entered again. Alison rose quickly and almost ran to meet her.

"Let me stay with him," she said, eagerly. "I am quite fresh, and you look tired already. Let me sit up with him. I can manage him quite well, and I know something of nursing."

"I musn't," said Mrs. Brander, who was one of those discreet old servants who never see anything or hear anything, and who have learned how invaluable such blindness and deafness make them. "The Colonel has brought Mr. Darke back, and I expect there'll be trouble because I let you take my place even for that half-hour."

But Alison was stubborn.

"What does it matter, now it's done?" she said. "He can find fault but once, and he'll do that in any case. Whether you go or stay, I mean to remain here for the present."

"You might trust me to look after him," said Mrs. Brander, reproachfully.

"Yes, yes! But there's one person here whom

I can't trust, and *you* might be got rid of, while I cannot," said Alison, growing reckless and bold as she heard a man's step on the stairs outside the half-open door. "Don't you see, it's very strange that they shouldn't get proper sick-nurses for him, when he's so ill? Does it look as if they meant to do the best for him, when they make excuses for not doing what ought to be done, what must be done?"

"Surely you can't think his father wouldn't do the best for him?" said Mrs. Brander. "Why, old Mr. Darke worships his son."

Alison hesitated.

"I do believe that," she said. "But Mr. Darke is a great deal under the influence of—of others, and it's of those others I'm afraid."

Noel sat up in bed and stared at them vacantly.

"Where is he?" he asked, in a low voice. "Where has he gone? I saw him go down the passage!" Then he broke off. His face again assumed a look of the utmost horror, and he said, in a whisper, as he had said so many times, "You! —*you!*"

Mrs. Brander and Alison exchanged a stealthy look, and then the housekeeper laughed nervously.

"What things he does get into his head, poor fellow!" she said, looking askance as she spoke.

Alison merely assented by a movement of the head. She wondered, on her side, how much Mrs. Brander knew—or guessed.

There was a knock at the door, and the house-

keeper looked out. Paul Penry, with his immovable footman's face, stood outside.

"Is Mrs. Jarvis in there?" he asked.

"Yes."

Alison showed herself.

"Mr. Darke is downstairs, ma'am, and he wishes to speak to you at once," said he.

Alison hesitated.

"Who is with him?" she said.

"Nobody, ma'am. The Colonel came back with him, but Mr. Darke is now by himself in the study."

Alison came out on the landing. She wanted an opportunity of speaking a few words to Paul Penry in his own proper person, but in the face of his forbidding renunciation of his own identity she felt a difficulty in doing so. He could help her, if he would, she felt sure. But she was sure, on the other hand, that he knew his own business, and that it might be dangerous for her to interfere with his doing it in his own way.

Just as she was debating with herself whether she dared break down, or attempt to break down, this barrier which he had set up between them, she caught sight of a moving shadow on her left, and knew that Colonel Cressingham was in waiting in the corridor just out of sight.

That was enough for her.

"Tell Mr. Darke I cannot come," she said.

And then her heart seemed to leap up, for she saw, by an impatient movement of the shadow on

the carpet, that her refusal had disconcerted some plan of the Colonel's.

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## CHAPTER XVIII.

WITH a face as unemotional and undisturbed as a plate, Paul Penry answered :

"Yes, ma'am."

And then, perhaps realizing that she wanted to speak to him, and wishing to frustrate her purpose, he turned and went downstairs.

Before she could re-enter the sick-room she found Colonel Cressingham beside her.

"Why won't you go down and speak to Mr. Darke?" he asked, with an air of cheerful and persuasive good-humor which, she felt, put her at a disadvantage. "You will make things very uncomfortable for yourself if you run counter to his wishes. Remember, you are only a member of this household as long as he pleases, and in your own interest I strongly advise you to be more civil."

Alison flushed and began to tremble. There was undeniable truth in the Colonel's words, for if Mr. Darke should choose to dismiss her instantly from his employment, how could she refuse to go?"

"When I see Mr. Darke," she said, in a hesi-

tating voice, "I think I can show him that I didn't mean to be uncivil."

"Why not take advantage of the opportunity of speaking to him now? Come, I know why it is you won't go downstairs. You have taken some absurd notion into your head—you'll forgive my speaking plainly, Mrs. Jarvis—that I have some sinister intention with regard to Noel. But you're mistaken, indeed. Supposing I were the villain you seem to think me——"

"Colonel Cressingham, how can you say such a thing? What have I ever said or done to make you suggest——"

The Colonel smiled.

"Your face is more candid than you suppose," said he. "If you could have looked in the glass in Noel's room just now you would have seen mistrust, suspicion, on every feature."

Alison's eyes fell.

"If you will remember, Colonel Cressingham," said she, "the strange things which have happened here since I came to the place, you will see that it's impossible not to feel mistrust and suspicion. I don't mean of you in particular, but——"

She paused.

"But what?" urged he, gently.

"Well, one feels a general suspicion that there is something wrong somewhere," she cried, desperately. "And now that Noel has been attacked—for I can't deny the interest I take in him——"

the one point on which all my thoughts are fixed is to see him get well and get him away."

"Well, that is the point on which my thoughts are fixed, too. As a friend of the family, anxious to get the family out of a scrape into which they have been forced by the conduct of an objectionable relative, the one thing I most desire is that Noel should get well speedily and—marry Lady Rosina."

The color faded from Alison's cheeks.

"Well, I wish that, too," she said, in a low voice. "I do, indeed."

The Colonel looked slightly incredulous. Alison's eyes flashed as they met his.

"You don't believe me," she said, "but it's true. I left London chiefly on his account. I did more than that. And, remember, I'm not back here of my own accord; indeed, I scarcely know now why I am here. But you know that it was at Mr. Darke's own earnest request that I came."

She turned to the door of the sick-room, but the Colonel intervened and held the handle.

"You must go down to Mr. Darke first," he said, firmly. "You must excuse me if I seem to dictate to you, but I do it for your own good."

Alison was frightened. An altercation which was bound to be more or less noisy at the very door of the sick-room was out of the question. Yet more and more reluctant was she to leave Noel in the power of this man. Although his personality was so charming that while talking to him it was impossible not to fall more or less

under its influence, she had too much ground for mistrust of him to let these impressions get the better of her judgment.

Fortunately her very terrors came unexpectedly to her rescue. She looked so horribly frightened that the Colonel began to laugh, and said, impatiently:

"How can you be so absurd, Mrs. Jarvis, as to suppose I want to do the lad harm? How could I, in the face of what you would say—now, how could I? Here's our good friend, Mrs. Brander, installed as sick-nurse, and I think you may safely trust her to look after our patient."

Alison nodded slowly. It was quite true that, knowing she was going to meet the patient's father with mistrust of the Colonel strong in her heart, that astute gentleman would be too much afraid of her tongue to attempt any further outrage.

Suddenly making up her mind, she therefore said, "Very well, I'll go," and ran downstairs as fast as she could, which was not so very fast, as her limbs were shaking and her hands slid along the polished stair-rail when she held it for support.

She had to pause a moment at the study door to try to recover some outward semblance of a composure she was far from feeling. It was with a face pallid and grey that she at last tottered into the room, where she found Mr. Darke wheeling himself quickly up and down the room, as his manner was when he was agitated or an-

noyed. Practice had made him expert in the manipulation of his chair, and he wheeled himself suddenly round to face her with disconcerting abruptness.

"Why didn't you come down when I first sent for you?" he asked, sharply.

She was conscious that he was looking at her with a peculiarly penetrating expression, as if he would have pierced to the deepest thoughts in her mind. She instinctively kept her eyes down or turned away from him, so strong was her feeling that he might be able to read her inmost heart.

"I was watching by your son's bedside," said she. "You know he wants more than one nurse."

"Indeed! I should have thought his parents were the best judges of that," said he, tartly. "So you have been taking Mrs. Brander's place, I understand? Pray, are you a qualified sick-nurse?"

"I can't say that. But I know something about the duties."

There was a pause. Then Mr. Darke, still keeping his eyes fixed upon her face, asked, abruptly:

"And pray, what opinion did you form as to his condition?"

"I think he's so ill that he needs more watching and more careful nursing than he can get in the present circumstances," said she, boldly.

Mr. Darke said nothing for a moment, but took a turn up the room in his chair.



"Is he conscious now?" he asked.

"He was part of the time while I was with him. Not all the time."

"Did he say anything to throw any light upon the way in which he came by his injury?"

Alison looked up then and met his eyes.

"He said something about it, but it wasn't very clear. He seemed to mix up one thing with another," said she.

Mr. Darke looked thoughtful.

"I know. I'm anxious about him," said he. "When there is injury to the head one never knows whether the brain may not sooner or later be affected."

"Then surely," said she, quickly, "if you think it's so serious as that, no time ought to be lost in getting him proper nurses?"

Mr. Darke looked up angrily.

"Do you think I don't do the best for him?" said he, quickly.

"I'm sure you mean to, but not so sure that you succeed," said Alison, boldly.

She had seen Mr. Darke's black eyes flash out sparks of anger before, but never before had she seen them glow with rage as they did at that moment. But she was reckless in her anxiety on Noel's account, and, now that the battle had begun, she stood her ground.

"You've grown very—what shall I say—very independent!" said he, in an ominous voice.

"When I believe it's perhaps a case of life and death, what else can I be?" persisted Alison.

Mr. Darke continued to glare at her angrily for some seconds, and then he turned away again and went twice up and down the room, ending by wheeling himself to the extreme end, where he remained some seconds in deep thought. Then he came rapidly down upon her again, and she saw that his brow had cleared and that he had made up his mind on some important point.

"You know," said he, in quite a different tone from that he had so far used to her during the interview, "how strong my objection is to nurses and their chatter?"

"Yes."

"You know all about my unfortunate eldest son, Swithin, and the fact that he is sometimes in a condition bordering upon irresponsibility?"

She bowed her head in assent.

"Well, then, you must understand how necessary it is to have none but very discreet persons about here, persons upon whom one can rely."

' Oh, yes. But when——"

"Hush! Listen. I know you can be discreet when you like. I know that you are too strong-minded to be really frightened if it seems for a few moments as if my poor boy had gone out of his mind, when he mixes things up, as you have heard him do."

"Oh, yes," said she, in a sort of stifled voice, wondering what this new appreciation of her good qualities might portend.

"Well, then, since you're so anxious to be of use, I shall make arrangements with Mrs. Bran-

der for you to do a share of the nursing, and then, if to-morrow he is no better, we will see about letting you have your own way and getting a couple of professional nurses to attend him."

Alison did not know whether she was pleased with this decision or only mystified. She bowed her head, without speaking, and then, as there was a pause, she took a step toward the door. But it was evident that Mr. Darke expected her to say something else.

"Well?" said he.

Alison looked at him, but said nothing.

"You have no more fears, no more troubles, to tell me of?"

She shook her head. Of what use would it be to say anything about the Colonel and her suspicions?

"I have only to say," said she, "that I'll do my best—for Noel."

And she went out of the room.

Running upstairs again, she found that Mrs. Brander had been left undisturbed in the sick-room during her absence, and the two women speedily made arrangements for sharing the nursing of the invalid between them.

Fortunately their task proved lighter than they had expected, for his condition began to improve that very night, and when the doctor came in the morning he was sleeping quietly, after a fair night.

Alison was glad that this new occupation saved her from further intercourse with the rest of the

family for the time, and she was still further pleased to hear that the Colonel had left for town directly after breakfast.

The day passed quietly. She was careful not to let Noel talk, and especially careful not to let him know that he had betrayed any of the family secrets during his delirium.

Both Mrs. Darke and Carrie visited the room from time to time, and, though they were coolly civil to her, Alison knew that they regarded her rather as a dangerous rival to Lady Rosina than as a friend in need, and that they kept a watchful eye upon her for signs of over-solicitude on her part toward her patient.

Alison troubled herself but little about this; she knew that her own motives were upright and that her care was necessary, and, above all, she knew that under the watchfulness of her unwearying eyes Noel was rapidly getting better. His distress of mind, indeed, she could do nothing to alleviate, little as she said or would let him say, she was sure.

Mr. Darke did not come to see his son, and she heard that a fresh attack of gout kept him a prisoner.

When night came it was the housekeeper's turn to take her place by the bedside, and Alison gently passed her hand over Noel's forehead, as if he had been a child, as she wished him good-night.

"You'll sleep now," she said. "You're beautifully cool and comfortable, aren't you?"

"Yes," said he. Then, as a shade of distress crossed his face, he added: "Are you going?"

"Yes. Mrs. Brander's here."

"Oh, yes, I'm all right. Only—only——" He paused. "It's about you; I'm uneasy about *you*. Couldn't you stay somewhere nearer than the wing?"

Mrs. Brander interposed gently.

"You'd better let Mrs. Jarvis go back to her own room and have a good night's rest, sir," she said. "She looks very tired, and she wants to be fresh to come back here in the morning."

"Yes, yes, I know——"

Still he did not look satisfied, though he said nothing more. But the housekeeper followed Alison to the door and whispered, with a smile:

"He says you're to take care of yourself—great care."

Alison smiled back at her.

"All right," said she, as she went away.

Her room was a long way from this part of the house, and on the floor above. Alison was not at all nervous, but the circumstances of Noel's illness, the mystery that hung about the house, and perhaps a certain feeling resulting from Noel's own anxiety on her account made her look behind her once or twice on her way upstairs.

Once in her room, however, she was much too tired to sit up indulging in either fears or reflections, and within twenty minutes of her locking

her door her head was on the pillow; in another ten minutes she was fast asleep.

She was awakened by a noise like a scratching on the outer panels of the door; sitting up in the dark, she heard the sound again, rather louder than before.

She shivered a little, lay down and tried to go to sleep again.

Once more she heard the noise, but this time it was more than the scratching she had heard at first; it was a constant, monotonous knocking, also.

She ran to the door and, without unlocking it, asked:

“Who’s there?”

There was no answer, and she heard footsteps going away, shuffling footsteps that she did not know.

She dressed quickly and waited by the door, and presently she heard a knocking a little way off. It sounded as if it came from the head of the stairs. She unlocked the door, opened it and peeped out. Then she heard the shuffling footsteps going quickly down the stairs.

She ran out and looked cautiously down. In the dark she could just discern a shrouded figure going down the lower flight. She was too much excited to be prudent, and she followed. The figure disappeared into the corridor leading to the gallery, and after a moment’s hesitation she went, too.

She thought the figure might be that of Paul

Penry, and that he might have made some discovery in connection with the robberies that had been going on, and that he perhaps wished to have her as a witness of what he had found.

So she went along the corridor in the darkness, no longer seeing or hearing the figure, until she came to the two doors of the gallery.

Both were open, and she peeped timorously in, not daring to call to Penry, and not liking to venture further without knowing with whom she might have to deal.

Looking cautiously in, she caught sight of a flickering light at the extreme end of the gallery. She could not make out where it came from, and, taking a step forward, she found herself on the inner side of the door before she was aware of what she was doing.

Then she saw that there was, indeed, not only a light, but a strong smell of burning oil within the long room, and, with an exclamation of surprise and dismay, she took another forward step to see more clearly what it was that was burning.

The next moment, with a gasp of horror, she cried, "Fire!"

For on the floor, spreading slowly toward her feet, was a lake of petroleum, oozing from a great overturned can in the corner of the room, while a little night-light, which usually swung from a lamp suspended from the wall, was burning on the floor close to the oil.

She fled across the room to put out the light,

but even as she did so the oil caught fire and threw up a great wall of flame, driving her back.

Rushing to the door, crying, "Fire!" with all her might, she tried to turn the handle.

But it would not move. She shook, rattled, pushed, fought, screaming loudly the while, for the flames were roaring behind her.

And then the hideous truth burst in upon her—she was locked in!

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## CHAPTER XIX.

TWENTY minutes later there came a violent knocking at the door of Mr. Darke's room, and the clamorous voice of a man-servant calling to him energetically by name.

"Mr. Darke, Mr. Darke! Are you awake, sir?"

From the bedclothes came a voice, half-sleepy, half-startled:

"Eh? What? Who is it? What is it? What's the matter?"

It was the voice of the second footman, Penry, who answered:

"The gallery's on fire, sir! We've sent for the fire-brigade, and the men are all at work doing their best to put it out, but we can't get water fast enough, and the blaze is terrific. It'll be all they can do to save the rest of the house from



catching fire. I'm afraid the gallery's done for, sir."

But Mr. Darke was incredulous. Perhaps he was hardly yet awake.

"On fire! on fire!" he repeated. "Nonsense! Here, Brett, Brett! Call Brett, and for heaven's sake be quick about it." The sense that this might be true was taking the place of his sleepy incredulity, and Mr. Darke was stammering with excitement and distress at his own helplessness when Penry went into the dressing-room adjoining Mr. Darke's bedchamber and roused the sleeping valet.

By this time Mr. Darke was shouting to him vigorously, and the lad tumbled out of bed, still half-asleep, hurried on his clothes, and went in to help his master.

Penry went in, too. Mr. Darke was sitting up in bed, his black eyes full of consternation.

"Here, help me, some of you, and make haste! Great heavens! It is true! It must be true!"

For at that moment they all saw through the drawn blinds a great glare of bright light, and Penry, running to the nearest window, looked out and cried:

"Come here, sir. Let me help you across, and you can see for yourself."

The two servants helped Mr. Darke, whose limbs were trembling so much that he was even more helpless than usual, across the floor to the window. He had to put his head out to see the full extent of the conflagration. When he did

so an appalling sight met his eyes. Through the skylights, with their iron bars, there shot up great tongues and sheets of flame, while volumes of dense black smoke were carried by the wind right into the face of the owner of the priceless collection. A crowd had already gathered in the grounds and were streaming round the end of the long building, trampling down shrubs and flowers, shouting and gesticulating as they came.

Mr. Darke fell back into the arms of the servants, muttering, hoarsely:

"My collection! My collection! My pictures! My—my——"

He gasped, he choked, he could get no further with his lamentation; and Brett, the young valet, said:

"Well, sir, it's lucky it's no worse. It might have been the house, with you and the ladies and all!"

But this was small comfort to Mr. Darke, who moaned as they helped him to dress, and declined to be alarmed at the suggestion that the fire might spread to the main building.

"Let it spread!" moaned he, desperately. "What's the house compared to my collection? The work of years—years—the work of a life—all gone! If I were to try for the rest of my life I could never get such another collection together again."

It was he and the valet who did most of the talking while Mr. Darke's hasty toilet went on. The footman, though he made himself actively

useful, said little. When at last they got the master of the house downstairs, carrying him rather than helping him to walk, they found a scene of terrible confusion on the ground floor. The ladies of the house and the women-servants were in a state of piteous distress, and were getting in the way of one or two of the household who had kept their heads, and who were doing their best to prevent the spread of the flames from the built-out gallery to the house itself.

At the sight of her husband Mrs. Darke quite broke down.

"Oh, Jo, this will break your heart!" sobbed she.

All the servants were hushed into silence by the appearance of the master, and all noticed the ghastly pallor of his face, in which his black eyes seemed to glow with an unnatural light. He stretched out a feeble hand, and, caressing his wife's arm, murmured, in a broken voice:

"We must bear up, my dear; we must bear up!"

"How do you think it happened?" Mrs. Darke asked, suddenly.

He shook his head.

"I don't know. I daren't even try to think now. But we'll have inquiries made in the morning," said he, quickly.

"I believe some one set the place on fire on purpose to spite you, papa," cried Carrie, sobbing.

"Hush! hush! We mustn't say that—until we know more," said Mr. Darke, trying to speak gently.

"But you remember that some one tried to get in before," went on Carrie, with excitement. "Perhaps it's the very same man!"

"Well, if it is the work of an incendiary," said Mr. Darke, in a firm voice, "he shall be brought to justice. I'll leave no stone unturned, not one!"

All present were impressed by the sonorous voice, the earnest face, and a murmur of sympathy, respectful but warm, went round the assembled household.

All night the commotion lasted. The fire-brigade arrived late, and ill-equipped, and confined their efforts to preventing the spread of the fire to the main building, while the servants cleared all the furniture out of that part of the house nearest to the gallery.

Before morning broke it was evident both that the gallery and its contents were destroyed beyond hope and that little injury would be done to the house itself beyond the scorching of the side nearest to the fire.

But an ugly whisper had got about by that time that some one was missing. It did not reach the ears of the family until breakfast-time, when a pale servant announced that a shoe had been discovered among the *débris* on the floor of the gallery.

Only Mrs. Darke and Carrie were as yet in the room, and neither had yet sat down to the table.

"A shoe! Whose shoe?" cried Mrs. Darke, aghast.

The servant hesitated. Then, in a low voice, he said :

"Mrs. Jarvis is not in her room, ma'am. And we think—it's thought—we're afraid——"

A scream from Carrie stopped them.

"Oh, mother," cried the poor girl, while tears of horror ran down her face, "it's like the day—the morning—when they told us Anne Saunders was dead. What does it mean? What does it mean?"

Mrs. Darke clutched her daughter's arm.

"Sh-sh!"

But Carrie was too much excited to be silent.

"If it's true," cried she, "how will you break it to papa? And—and—" her voice dropped to a whisper—"to Noel?"

"Call the servants! Call Mrs. Brander! Ask everybody where and when Mrs. Jarvis was last seen!" cried Mrs. Darke.

But all inquiries elicited nothing but the fact that Alison had gone straight to her room on leaving the housekeeper with her patient, and that, as she made no reply when she was called that morning, the housemaid had entered her room and found that her bed had been slept in, but that she was not there.

Finally, much to Mrs. Darke's distress, the master of the house had to be told of Alison's disappearance.

Mr. Darke, too ill after the excitement of the night to be able to leave his bed, stared at his

wife in consternation when she told him what had been discovered.

"And was it *her* shoe that was found in the gallery? Is anybody sure of that?" he asked, abruptly.

"Yes, it was her shoe; we all recognize it," stammered Mrs. Darke; and, noticing the expression on her husband's face, she uttered a cry and said: "Oh, Jo, you don't think she did it—she set fire to the place, do you?"

He would not answer. But, notwithstanding all entreaties, he insisted on getting up at once and on sending for the superintendent of police to help the investigation he meant to make.

A cloud of horror and gloom had by this time descended upon the household. After the excitement of the night there was a hush and a silence, and people went about with subdued tread, and exchanged whispers in their comments on the catastrophe.

A superstitious dread of the place where so many uncanny things had happened was beginning to spread in the household, and Mrs. Brander was beset by intimations from the servants that they meant to "give warning." The housekeeper was beside herself with dread lest it should come to Noel's ears that Alison had disappeared.

It had been impossible to keep the news of the fire from him, and one of his first questions had been whether it was likely to spread to the wing where Alison's room was. But he had been told

that there was no fear of this, and for the time the knowledge had satisfied him. Now, however, the hour was approaching when Alison would have taken her turn at watching by the sick bed, and Mrs. Brander did not know what excuse to give to account for her non-appearance.

In the meantime Mr. Darke and the police superintendent had had a short interview, and had gone to the gallery together.

A terrible sight of wreck and ruin presented itself to their eyes.

At the extreme end of the room the roof had fallen in, blocking the view with an undistinguishable mass of slate and broken glass and smoking beams, in the mist of which a bent and broken steel gauntlet, belonging to a suit of armor, stood up weirdly in the wreckage.

On either side portions of beautiful cabinets still stood against the blackened walls, while the middle of the room was a swamp in which exquisite curios and sodden fragments of valuable pictures lay, with broken porcelain and disfigured metal work, in the water which had been poured in through window, door and roof.

The fireman in charge was hunting among the *débris* in the middle of the floor. He was just under one of the skylights, every pane of which had been broken, but above which one of the iron bars still remained intact, with a morsel of charred rope affixed to it.

Mr. Darke pointed to it at once with keen eyes.

"Do you see that rope?" he said to the superin-

tendent, sharply, "and that the other bar has been bent and wrenched aside? Some one got in that way—some one who set fire to the place!"

The superintendent said nothing until he had examined the bent bar, the charred rope and the roof outside. Then he agreed that there might be something in Mr. Darke's theory. No attempt had been made while the fire raged to get into the gallery from the top, yet the rope and its condition were evidence that a recent attempt had been made to enter by that means.

The door had been locked when the fire was discovered, and no incendiary could have got in that way, since the keys were safely in Mr. Darke's possession all the time.

Mr. Darke, seated on a pile of charred timbers, was examining the shoe which had been picked up in the ruins.

"How does this come here?" he repeated, staring at it with a puzzled frown.

The superintendent looked at it, also.

"I understand it belongs to the same lady who was here when we had to investigate into an attempt to get into the gallery, and into the drowning of one of your servants," suggested the police officer, with a grave face.

"Yes, but, oh! Surely you don't connect—I shouldn't like to think——"

Mr. Darke stopped abruptly and frowned.

The superintendent pressed him.

"Think, sir, whether you had any reason to



suppose that this lady had friends outside, friends not quite on the square?"

Mr. Darke waved his hand, as if waving away an unwelcome thought.

"Oh, dear, no, no. She was very nervous, and perhaps a little curious, and—and suspicious. That I thought quite natural, after the unfortunate experience she had when she first came here, on the occasion you mention. But, oh, dear, no, I had no reason to suppose she was anything but a perfectly honorable woman, and a most unfortunate one."

"Unfortunate?"

"Well, yes; she was separated from her husband——"

"Do you know anything about him?"

"Well, no; she was reticent about him, naturally enough, I think. I don't pry into the private affairs of my dependents."

"A little prying is necessary sometimes, though, sir," said the superintendent, with a shake of the head.

"I only hope the poor lady herself hasn't been prying, with fatal results," said Mr. Darke, with a face of distress. "Heaven knows, I shouldn't think twice of my own loss, compared to such a terrible calamity as that!"

The superintendent looked again at the shoe, and then at the fireman who was still searching the spot where it had been found.

"We must hope not, sir," said he. "But it takes time to get to the bottom of this mass of wreck-

age, in the water and all. After all, the shoe may only show she was here at some time, not that she was here when the fire broke out!"

"But she's disappeared!" said Mr. Darke, in a voice full of dismay.

The superintendent looked thoughtful.

"Could she have got at your keys?"

"I think not. As soon as I heard of the fire I felt for them under my pillow, where I always keep them. They were still there, and I gave them myself to one of the firemen last night, so that they might get at the fire from the door. And they found it locked; they found both doors locked," said Mr. Darke, emphatically.

"Very extraordinary," said the officer.

Mr. Darke's eyes were fixed with a terrible intentness on the spot where the fireman was searching. The superintendent, seeing his livid face and starting eyeballs, began to be afraid that he would have a fit, and he hastily offered his arm.

"Come, sir, it'll only upset you if they find anything," said he, "and your being here won't do any good. So let me take you back into the house, and as soon as we find or hear anything we'll let you know at once."

Mr. Darke, however, did not want to go. He seemed fascinated, rooted to the spot. He waved his hand to signify his intention of remaining where he was, when a voice sounded in the corridor outside and caught his ear.

It was that of Noel, his son, weak, hoarse, wild, but unmistakably Noel's.

Mr. Darke's face changed; the superintendent, who had raised him against his will from the uncomfortable seat he had found, felt that he was trembling all over.

"Stay in here," said he. "Stay and find out—if—if the poor girl's dead. It's my son; I must speak to my son!"

He got the superintendent to help him through the first door.

"Now," said he, "I can manage with this."

He had a stick in his hand, with which he dragged himself through into the dark corridor outside. Then he shut the door, and found himself face to face with Noel, who, staggering and weak, still looked less of an invalid than he.

Noel drew back with a cry. Before he could speak his father had thrown himself upon him and was holding his right hand over his son's mouth with a grip of iron.

"Speak if you dare!" hissed he in the young man's ear.

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## CHAPTER XX.

His father's onslaught upon him was so vigorous, so unexpected, that Noel was for a few seconds like a child in his hands, unable to do more than gasp out in a stifled whisper:

"Let me go, let me go."

He staggered back against the wall of the narrow and dark corridor, with his father's hand still over his mouth, almost paralyzed with surprise and horror.

Still holding him fast with one hand, and supporting himself by his stick with the other, Mr. Darke forced his son back step by step along the wall until they had nearly reached the door which led into the hall. They were now out of hearing of the police superintendent and the fireman, even if those two officials had chosen to open the doors at their end to listen to what was going on.

But even then the elder man did not relax his grasp. Peering into his son's face with eyes that looked lurid in the dim light, he said, between his clenched teeth, in a voice as earnest as it was low: "Look here—you mustn't say a word; you mustn't utter a sound. It's of no use to fill the air with wailings over what has happened."

Noel put up his hands to get free, but his father held on and said, sternly:

"Promise to be quiet, to be reasonable, to listen to me, and I'll let you speak."

"I promise," gasped Noel, in a hoarse whisper.

Mr. Darke relaxed his grip at once, and his son said:

"Alison—is it true? What has become of her?"

"She's dead. Her body is lying in the gallery at this moment."

"Great heavens! And do you think that I——"

"I think that you will keep your word, your pledged word, and listen to what I have to say. As for this accident——"

"It was no accident!" cried Noel, fiercely.

Mr. Darke advanced close to his son's face a visage which was like that of a snarling animal.

"If it was not an accident," said he, impressively, "it was a murder. Are you prepared to accuse anybody here of murder?"

Noel shrank away, shaking from head to foot. Then he put up his hand to his forehead, which was white and wet.

"It's more—more than I can bear!" he whispered, hoarsely. "I wish I had never been born."

Mr. Darke replied to this with a short, mocking laugh.

"Mere idle words," he said, shortly, "for which we have no time. For we are threatened—you must know it—with ruin, nothing short of ruin. We've had misfortune after misfortune here lately, and last night's events have put the climax to our ill luck. What family could bear up against such a succession of tragedies: two tragic deaths within a few weeks; your brother Swithin's vagaries; an attempted robbery; a ruinous fire? Ask yourself whether you think we can hold up our heads after such things without help, prompt help, from the only person who can help us!"

"What—what do you mean?"

"I mean that you, *you* have the power to extri-

cate us all from our troubles without any delay. Indeed, the least delay would be fatal."

"What on earth do you want me to do?"

"Keep the promise you made some time ago. And, since you can't marry a woman who is dead, marry the one who is alive, who is longing for you."

Noel shrank away in horror and disgust.

"No," said he, shortly. "Anything else——"

"There's nothing else to be done. Remember, your family's existence depends upon it."

Noel was speechless with dismay. Dimly he felt that a snare had been laid for his feet, cleverly, cautiously, and by such slow, wily steps that he had seen nothing of what was preparing until too late. He scarcely dared to look his father in the face; it seemed to him that he himself was being bowed down under a weight of guilt and infamy which he could not even yet measure or understand. Mr. Darke was impatient at his silence.

"Quick, quick! I must have your decision, I must have your word," he hissed into the young man's ear. "After all, you couldn't have married a woman who had a husband already——"

"She had no husband! The marriage was not a real marriage," said Noel, hotly.

Mr. Darke brought his stick down with a short and impatient rap on the floor.

"The law recognizes no such distinctions," he said, drily. "It allows a woman only one hus-

band at a time. And, anyhow, there is now no question of marrying Alison, for she is dead."

The young man shivered.

"In the meantime we who are alive want to go on living. If you don't consider me, pray think of my wife, who's been as good as a mother to you, and of the young ones. Are they to have a chance or not? Are we all to sink to the lower levels of existence, to be out of the running, out of the hunt? Are you to be a struggling man all your life? Or are we all to go up higher, with your help, and keep our name and fame clean and our pockets full?"

"How on earth would my marrying Lady Rosina do all this?" said Noel, impatiently.

"You must take it from me that it would," said Mr. Darke. "Alliance with an earl's family gives a social foundation upon which one can build what one pleases. Come, I want your promise."

But Noel would not give it.

"There's something you must clear up to me first," said he, firmly. "You know what I saw, what I've seen twice now. Heaven forbid that I should have to suspect what I do suspect, but I tell you, if it were true, I'd rather tie a millstone round my own neck and drown myself in the river than ask any woman to ally herself with my family through me."

Mr. Darke laughed contemptuously.

"It's not true," said he. "You might believe your own father, I should think. However, we'll put it like this: if I can prove to you what I've

said I could prove, and what I *can* prove, too, that you were wrong in that wild notion of yours, wrong both times, will you promise to marry Lady Rosina?"

"You're taking it too much for granted that she's anxious to marry me," said Noel.

"Well, in the case I have mentioned, would you ask her? Think what depends upon it!"

Noel made a gesture of impatient despair.

"In that case," he said, "I suppose I should."

With a look and gesture of passionate satisfaction, which took his son quite by surprise, Mr. Darke threw himself upon the young man and, griping his shoulders with an intensity which sent a thrill through him, murmured in his ear:

"God bless you, my boy! You have saved us all!"

Before the young man could recover breath to stammer out a protest Mr. Darke, leaning heavily on his stick and supporting himself against the wall, had staggered to the door, opened it, and passed out into the hall.

He had scarcely stumbled to the nearest of the hall seats, panting and trembling in every limb, when Mrs. Darke, peering out of the door of the morning-room, heard the sound of his stick upon the oak floor and came running like a girl toward him. Her face was pale and her eyes were moist.

"Oh, Jo!" she said, "I don't know what to do. All the dreadful things in the world seem to be happening together. And you—oh, how ill you look!"



He shook his head.

"I'm all right," said he, in a husky whisper. "Tell me—what's the matter now?"

"Why, Lord Geldestone's come, and Rosina. The girl is half-crazy, because she's evidently afraid she won't be allowed to marry Noel. She's asking to see him."

Mr. Darke raised his head quickly.

"Sh-sh!" said he.

At that moment Noel himself opened the door leading from the corridor and tottered into the hall, very white and with dull eyes. He tried to avoid looking at either his father or Mrs. Darke, and crossed to the stairs with the feeble yet hurried steps of one who is scarcely sure of the support of his own limbs.

Not until he had reached the top of the staircase and, shutting himself in his own room, had got out of hearing, did his father let the lady speak.

"Well," said he.

"I don't know whether anybody's been making mischief. You know how spiteful people are because they visit us, but Lord Geldestone seems fidgety and cold, and he wants to see you. If Noel doesn't clinch the matter at once I believe the affair will be 'off' altogether."

Mr. Darke uttered a short but emphatic exclamation.

"I must pull myself together and go in and see them," he said. "Where are they?"

"In the morning-room. At least, they were.

But Lord Geldestone was half in and half out of the window, and I don't know if he isn't gone by this time."

"Help me, then."

Innocent Mrs. Darke thought that her husband's pale face and bent back, and that air of melancholy in his face, would mollify Lord Geldestone and cause him to be "nicer" than he had been so far that morning. But her sentimental woman's mind had not quite fathomed that of the earl, whose face fell when he met the haggard eyes of his host.

"How do? Very terrible disaster this, very," said Lord Geldestone, as he just touched Mr. Darke's fingers and let them go. "You're much upset, I see."

And he looked askance at his host with a face full of cold suspicion, before which both Mr. and Mrs. Darke quailed and grew uneasy.

"Terrible, most terrible," said Mr. Darke, eyeing his important guest with keen yet almost pleading eyes. "I feel as if I should never get over the shock, never!"

"Dear, dear!" said Lord Geldestone, shortly, with a dry, brisk irritability which showed that his own emotions were by no means of a tender sort. Mr. Darke looked up again, and grew passionate, fervid.

"If I thought that anything I could do, any sacrifice I could make, any suffering I could undergo, would bring the poor girl to life again, believe me, I'd go through it cheerfully."

And his head fell under the weight of his feelings. Lord Geldestone, however, cleared his throat and said, with considerable indifference:

"Oh, ah, yes; there was a girl burned, wasn't there?"

Mr. Darke's head was still bent, but one might almost have thought that the deep breath he drew was one of relief.

"Yes, yes," he murmured, brokenly.

Lord Geldestone heaved a perfunctory sigh.

"Ah, very sad, very sad," he said. "But—er—excuse me, but—er—great loss this! May I ask—er—I hope you were insured?"

Mr. Darke became the man of business again directly. He was shrewd enough to see that Lord Geldestone, who could overlook the want of sixteen quarterings in a millionaire, would be more particular about the pedigree of a man to whom a couple of hundred thousand pounds was no trifle.

"As far as the collection goes," said Mr. Darke, with a careless wave of the hand, "it was a hobby, nothing more. Mind, I don't mean to say that I didn't love my treasures; everybody knows I did; people laughed at me for it. But that loss is a trifle, swallowed up in the tragedy of this unfortunate woman's death."

Then Lady Rosina spoke for the first time.

"It was the typewriter girl, wasn't it?" she said, with interest, but without much appearance of distress.

"Yes. A most clever secretary and amanuensis," said Mr. Darke.

"I've no doubt she was clever," said Lady Rosina, with somewhat malicious dryness.

Mr. Darke went on :

"You want to know whether I'm insured. That isn't of much consequence, as it happens, but I think I was insured—yes, I am sure I was. Not to anything like the full extent of the loss, of course, but I was insured for about thirty or forty thousand pounds in three or four offices. I suppose they'll pay me some hundred thousand or so altogether, but I shall never collect again. I haven't the heart to, at my time of life. This tragedy, coming on the top of it all, has given me a sort of disgust of the whole business."

Lord Geldestone was now as sympathetic as he could wish. He advised him to write without delay to the insurance people, and would not be satisfied until Mr. Darke, with a great air of indifference, actually sat down in his presence and wrote out particulars of his claim. On consideration, he was able to remember the whole particulars of the amount of his insurance in each office, and he wrote his letters with the careful minuteness which Lord Geldestone considered that the matter demanded.

In the meantime Lady Rosina, who was in an agitated and tearful mood, was talking to the ladies of the house, and, on learning from Mrs. Darke that Noel had been up that morning, she begged earnestly that she might see him.

Mr. Darke, from the writing-table where he and Lord Geldestone sat, heard the plea and Mrs. Darke's excuses.

He turned round.

"I'll bring him," said he. "The fact is, he is in a state of great distress about you, Lady Rosina, having some notion in his head that he's offended you in some way."

"Offended me! What nonsense!" cried Lady Rosina. "I suppose he thought, poor boy, that I didn't call to inquire about him as often as I might have done."

"The truth is," went on Mr. Darke, turning to Lord Geldestone, "that he is dying for an opportunity to—well, I must confess it now, I suppose—to propose to your daughter, and he has an idea that she has been trying to avoid giving him the opportunity."

Lady Rosina laughed and Lord Geldestone coughed. If Mr. Darke could lose a hundred thousand pounds' worth of property without moving a muscle, why, clearly Noel was as desirable a son-in-law as could be found in the present slack state of the marriage market.

"I suppose we shall hear from him when he's on his legs again," said he.

"You shall hear from him now," said Mr. Darke, and, beckoning to his wife, he got her to help him to the door, and passed with her into the hall, where he stood at the bottom of the stairs, calling:

"Noel, Noel!"

His son heard him and came out, looking a wreck of his usual self. But before he could do more than say, "What is it?" in answer to the summons, the door leading from the gallery corridor opened, and the police superintendent came out, saluted Mr. Darke and said:

"Beg pardon, sir, but I have some news for you—some good news."

Mr. Darke turned quickly at the words.

"Well," said he, anxiously, "what have you discovered?"

"That the young lady wasn't in the gallery, after all, sir," said the superintendent, triumphantly. "We've searched the place thoroughly, and there's never a trace of a human being anywhere."

But the news came so suddenly that Mr. Darke seemed unable to realize it. So great was the surprise, indeed, that one would hardly have thought the expression on his face was one of relief and joy as he said, hoarsely:

"Are you sure—quite sure?"

"Absolutely certain, sir; I could take my oath of it. Come and see for yourself."

Mrs. Darke sighed helplessly as she stood supporting her husband.

"Really, I'm not so very glad as I ought to be," she whispered in his ear. "There'll be more trouble with Noel about Rosina now!"

He silenced her testily, sharply.

"I am overjoyed," he said, "overjoyed. Thank

you, sergeant, a thousand thanks. I'll speak to you presently about this strange occurrence."

He turned to the stairs and called again to his son :

"Noel, come down. I want you."

The superintendent smiled.

"The young gentleman's gone, sir," said he. "He heard what I told you, and the words telling the lady was not burned to death were scarcely out of my mouth when"—and he snapped his fingers—" he was down the stairs and out at that side door like a flash of lightning!"

Mr. Darke stared stupidly round him. Yes, the snare had been set in vain. The bird was flown.

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## CHAPTER XXI.

MRS. DARKE uttered a faint moan.

"That's just what I predicted!" said she, in a whisper, in her husband's ear.

He silenced her by a gesture, and went on, in a voice stifled by emotion :

"Noel is off his head with joy, as we all are! I scarcely know what I'm doing or saying, I'm so much relieved! Really, sergeant, we had begun to look upon this place as fatal, after the death of first one and then another girl! And now—to find that it's—it's all right, that—that

there's nothing worse than the loss of the things, that there's been no more sacrifice of precious life—oh, it's too much relief, it's too much joy!"

And Mr. Darke bent his head and drew a long, sobbing breath.

"I wonder where he's gone to!" said Mrs. Darke, who was by no means so much moved as her husband at the news of Alison's escape. "And what's become of Mrs. Jarvis? It's all very strange, very strange isn't it?"

The police superintendent, to whom this remark was partly addressed, shifted from one foot to the other, and admitted that it was strange.

"I'll come with you into the gallery as soon as I can," went on Mr. Darke, recovering from his overwhelming delight sufficiently to decide what to do. "In the meantime I have to see Lord Geldestone, my son's future father-in-law, as I dare say you've heard"—the sergeant assented with respect—"and tell him this good news. Come, my dear, you must help me again. Sergeant, perhaps you'll lend a hand; I've been ill with the gout of late, and I'm less agile than ever."

Mrs. Darke and the superintendent got him up between them and led him to the door of the morning-room, where Mr. Darke placed himself in the nearest chair, and paused a few minutes for breath before addressing his guests. His wife would have spoken for him, but by a gesture he stopped her.

"No, no, my dear," panted he, "let me tell the



story. Lord Geldestone, I have good news and bad. The bad news is that poor Noel is not well enough to come down again; he got up too soon, it seems. The good news is that we all made a ghastly mistake; Mrs. Jarvis, my clever secretary, is not burned to death, as we feared. They've searched the gallery from end to end, and there's absolutely no evidence of her having been in the room, except the shoe which is said to have been hers."

"Then what has become of her?" asked the Earl, puzzled.

"That is what we can't understand. But I must tell you I don't—can't—*won't* believe the unkind things said about her—I won't for a moment."

All the ladies were on the alert at once.

"Oh, Jo! what things?" asked Mrs. Darke, quickly.

"Why, I've heard it said that she set fire to the place," cried Mr. Darke, indignantly, "out of malice because she didn't get as much attention here as she thought she was entitled to!"

"Surely that's not possible!" said Lord Geldestone.

"Oh, papa, I don't think she was such a horrid girl as that!" cried Carrie.

"Now, I shouldn't be at all surprised if that were the truth about her," said Lady Rosina. "I confess I didn't like her. She always had such an aggressive air of independence!"

"That's just what I thought of her," said Mrs.

Darke, quickly. "Of course, I should never have liked to say anything like that when I thought she had been burned alive; but now we know she's safe, there's no harm in telling the truth, is there?"

"Safe! But is she safe?" asked Lord Geldestone. "It's rather mysterious, isn't it? I think, Darke, you ought to leave no stone unturned to find out what's become of her?"

"Indeed, I won't."

"In the first place, there are the insurance offices to consider. You'll have a lot of trouble with them if there's any suggestion that the place was deliberately set on fire, you know."

"But if the offices won't pay in the case of a malicious fire, what's the use of insuring?" said Mrs. Darke.

There was a pause, during which Lord Geldestone laughed rather awkwardly.

"Oh, yes, they're bound to pay up, even in the case of the fire having been started deliberately, unless they can prove you did it yourself."

Mrs. Darke opened her eyes wide.

"Why, how can they think we would do it ourselves," said she, "when we lose ever so much more than the value that we're insured for?"

Lady Rosina laughed, but the Earl got a little impatient over her feminine obtuseness.

"Of course, if you could prove that, it would be all right," he said. "But values are often very difficult to prove. In any case, nobody ever expects to get paid a claim for a large sum by an

insurance company without a lot of disputing. And if they thought that this secretary of your husband's set fire to the gallery and then disappeared, they would be pretty sure to take advantage of the chance of saying, some of them, that the fire had been started by one of his employees in his interest."

All the ladies uttered little cries of surprise and horror.

"How shocking!" said Lady Rosina.

"How absurd!" said Carrie.

But Mr. Darke only laughed.

"If I had thought there was any danger of that suggestion being made," he said, carelessly, "I would never have put in a claim on any one of the offices."

"But, my dear Jo, could you afford to lose so much—a quarter of a million?" said his wife.

"Well, nobody cares to be shorn of that amount at one swoop," admitted Mr. Darke, good-humoredly; "but I say I would much rather submit to the loss than risk the scandal of such a suggestion being made."

"I don't for my part suppose for a moment that it will be made," said the Earl. "All I said was that you ought to find the young woman and make her state why she ran away. I think her conduct looks very fishy, I do, indeed, and that she ought to be brought back pretty sharply."

Mrs. Darke was considering the matter with a puzzled frown.

"I really do think there's something in the

notion that it was she who did this!" she said, at last. "She's not been at all nice to any of us lately, and I think if she could do us an ill turn she would."

Mr. Darke made an impatient gesture with his hand.

"What nonsense!" said he. "Why, the doors were found locked after the fire, just as I left them myself, when I last went into the gallery with Johnson, about five days ago!"

"But she might have got in from outside. You remember that a man was found to have tried to get in that way!" said Mrs. Darke.

"Yes, a man, but not a woman. It would take a very agile and good climber to get into the gallery at all from the outside, and Mrs. Jarvis could no more have done it than she could have flown. No. I'm inclined to think myself that the fire was started from the outside by some one; and I may tell you that the police superintendent has just found a bent bar and a bit of charred rope outside one of the skylights, which seems to bear out that view. But that the bar could not have been bent as it has been by any woman I'm ready to swear!"

This started a fresh topic of interest, and the ladies joined in a shrill chorus of questions and comments, which ended in their begging to be allowed to go and see the gallery for themselves.

But on this point Mr. Darke was inexorable. He said that nothing must be touched, now that it had been clearly demonstrated that there was

no human body among the wreckage; that the place must be left just as it was, not only in the interests of justice, since the disappearance of the secretary was a matter for the police, but on account of the claims which had already been sent in to the insurance companies, who would naturally demand, considering the amount of the sums claimed, that they should have full power to investigate into the damage done.

Lord Geldestone applauded this decision enthusiastically, and reminded his host that, however lightly he might treat sums of forty thousand pounds, the companies would not look upon them in the same light of easy indifference.

"Quite true," said Mr. Darke; "and, although I tell you I shall not press my claims—for, after all, the money's nothing, it's the blow to my hobby that matters to me—still, I've made the claims, and we must do everything in order."

"And when do you think we shall be able to see Noel?" asked Lady Rosina, in a low voice, as she bade good-bye to Mrs. Darke.

The poor lady was rather nonplussed for an answer, and her husband spoke for her.

"I fancy," he said, with an arch smile, "that you won't have to wait long! You will find a young man, a rather pale and feeble-looking young man, at your door in a day or two, with some pretext of a message to deliver or a flower to show, and an ulterior motive of obtaining a few minutes' conversation with *you*."

Lady Rosina laughed and looked archly over her shoulder.

"I hope the poor boy won't look *very* pale!" she said.

"I'm sure he will, though, if only from nervousness," said Mr. Darke.

But when the Earl and his daughter were gone Mr. Darke's manner changed, and he became moody and silent, snubbed poor Carrie for saying they would never screw Noel up to the point of proposing for a woman he didn't care for, and silenced his wife when she suggested that the police should be set on the track of Alison.

"Leave these matters to me and hold your tongue," said he, shortly.

Mrs. Darke, who worshipped her husband with the easy devotion of a spoiled and prosperous woman, took the rebuke with meekness and dropped the subject.

The day passed and the next, without any event of more importance than the arrival of some officials from the insurance companies, who came to investigate the extent of the damage. They made inquiries, also, as to the origin of the fire, and accepted Mr. Darke's own view that, all proper and necessary precautions having been taken, the mischief must have been done, either through negligence or design, from the outside, by the carelessness of one of the workmen who had been doing some repairs to the roof of the house during the last few days, but from whom no admissions would be obtainable, or with ma-

licious intent to destroy the property of the tenant of Riverscourt.

And in the evening both the Colonel and Captain Lansdell came down, much concerned at the news which had been communicated to them by Mrs. Darke, and full of condolences for their host.

He did not, however, let the affair prey upon his spirits; as he said, insurance or no insurance, the damage was done and there was an end of it. He was bound to be the loser by a hundred thousand pounds, and Mrs. Darke would have to be content without having her diamonds reset that year, and Noel could not have the yacht he had been promised. For the rest, he had done with hobbies for the remainder of his life, and never, never would he collect again. To pick up torn and shriveled rags, black and shapeless, and to know that the wretched fragment was once a Gainsborough or a Murillo, was an experience which he would never risk going through again.

In the meantime nothing was heard of either Noel or Alison, and Mr. Darke was much more troubled by this than his loss. His wife and daughter said frankly that they were sure Noel had gone to look for the typewriter girl, and the master of the house, though he contradicted their opinion savagely, looked perturbed by it all the same.

As for the disappearance of Alison, there was a vague feeling among them all that she had been frightened away, partly by the manifest antag-

onism of some of the family, and partly by this last misfortune of the fire, which had affected all the household more or less with the idea that there was something unlucky, uncanny, about Riverscourt.

Neither Colonel Cressingham nor Captain Lansdell expressed any opinion about the disappearance of either; they only listened with attention to the account given them.

But on the following morning, when they came down to breakfast, they found Mrs. Darke in tears. She explained to them that her husband had had some bad news—he would not tell her of what nature—and that it had made him ill again. She had scarcely made this statement, however, when the door opened, and Mr. Darke, very white, very feeble, and leaning heavily upon the arm of his valet, entered the room.

Without a word he signed to the two guests to follow him into the study, and there, after requesting them to shut the windows and to see that the door was closed after the departure of the servant, he laid on his desk before them three letters, and with a wave of the hand invited them to read them.

All three were to the same effect, and all three were from insurance offices in which Mr. Darke had insured his collection.

They were to the effect that, having regard to certain circumstances which had come to their knowledge, one of them being that the collection in question was enormously over-insured, they



refused to pay any part of the claim made against them.

The three gentlemen looked at each other.

"What do you think of this, gentlemen?" said Mr. Darke.

"I think," said Captain Lansdell, bluffly, "that there's a mischief-maker about."

The Colonel turned to him quickly.

"And I," said he, "dare swear I know who the mischief-maker is."

Mr. Darke looked at him not so much inquiringly as apprehensively.

"A woman?" said he.

"That confounded typewriter girl," said the Colonel, emphatically.

"By Jove, you've hit it, Cressingham! It's that jade, depend upon it. I never liked the roll of those big, dark eyes of hers!"

The Colonel was extraordinarily quiet.

"What can she prove?" he asked, briefly.

"Nothing, of course, nothing whatever," said Mr. Darke, with his grandest manner. "But she can lie. Every woman can. But she can, especially."

"And what lies will she tell?"

Mr. Darke hesitated.

"I suspect she's told some of them already. How otherwise can you account for these infamous letters?"

"You think she's been in communication with the insurance companies—already?" said the Captain.

It was the Colonel who answered :

"It looks like it. Nobody else would be so vindictive, so prompt. The informant must have been round to all the offices yesterday."

"But," objected Mr. Darke, abruptly, "she didn't know the names of the offices."

"Can you be sure of that?"

"Quite sure."

"Who posted your letters to them?"

"One of the servants. I don't know which one."

"Perhaps it's one of the servants who's served you this disgraceful trick," suggested the Captain, thumping the desk with his fist.

"How could they manage it so quickly? These offices wouldn't answer like that—the whole lot of them—without something more than a servant's tattle to go upon," said Mr. Darke.

"It's that girl!" repeated the Colonel once more, and he rose abruptly from the chair on which he had seated himself during this conversation. "I'll find her; I'll bring her to book."

"Will you do any good by that?" said the Captain, dubiously.

"Yes; I'll make her retract, apologize, withdraw. I swear I will."

"And how will you find her?"

The Colonel smiled faintly.

"She went away—disappeared—while Noel was ill. She wouldn't go far."

"But he's gone away, too."

"How can she know that? Anyhow, that's the

assumption I go upon, that she's not far off. There's a woman, a pleasant-looking woman, at the gardener's lodge. She may have taken refuge there."

Mr. Darke shrugged his shoulders, but let him carry out his suggestion at once. The Captain scoffed at his chances of success.

"The pair have sloped together," he said. "They're a hundred miles away by this time."

The Colonel only nodded and went out.

Ten minutes later, cigar in hand, he was sauntering past the pretty little cottage, embedded in shrubs and trees, where the head gardener lived with his wife. The Colonel was not satisfied with an inspection of the front; he went round through the trees to a small garden at the back, where the good woman dried her linen out of sight of "the quality."

In the lower room Alison was lying on a small couch by the open window. With the agility of a lad he sprang over the window-sill, couch and all, and shut down the window.

"No, don't rise, don't call out, Mrs. Jarvis. I want a word with you first."

And his mouth expanded with a most unpleasant smile.

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## CHAPTER XXII.

ALISON glanced first at her unwelcome visitor and then at the door. But before she could decide whether to cry out or not Colonel Cressing-

ham had drawn a chair to the side of the couch on which she was lying, with an indescribable but unostentatious gesture which at once made her decide not to make an attempt which might be unsuccessful.

"Oh, you frightened me, Colonel Cressingham," she said, struggling to regain her self-possession and to be at her best for the trying interview.

"Did I? I'm sorry. Pray forgive me. The fact is, I've been very anxious to see you, while you have seemed just as anxious to avoid me—in fact, all of us."

Alison looked down. There was something that made her shudder in the steadfast look of his cold blue eyes.

"I've hurt my ankle," said she, "and as there was illness and confusion at the house, I came here to—to——"

"To hide?" suggested the Colonel. "And I suppose I may add—to watch events from a convenient distance?"

Alison made no answer.

"And I suppose I may hazard a guess that it was in getting out of the gallery on the night of the fire that your foot was hurt."

This was hardly a question; it was rather an emphatic statement. Then Alison looked at him.

"How do you know that I was in the gallery on that night?" asked she, with composure. "You were in London, were you not, or at least away from Riverscourt?"

"Yes, of course I was," said the Colonel,

hastily. "I didn't hear of the fire till yesterday, when I got a note from Mrs. Darke telling me about it, and of their distress at your supposed death. One of your shoes was found in the gallery, as I suppose you know."

"And they had more reason than that to suppose I was there," said Alison, boldly. "I was locked in."

"Dear me! Have you any idea by whom?"

"Yes."

"And is it a secret?"

"Not to you, I should think," retorted Alison.

Then there was an awkward silence, and she did not dare to look at him again. At last he said:

"You appear to speak as if you had some resentment against me in the matter. Do you think it was I who locked you in—I, who was in London at the time?"

Alison shook her head. Again there was a short silence, and again it was the Colonel who broke it.

"Well," he said, "I suppose you will break your mysterious silence in your own time, in your own way, very much to the advantage of—Noel, for instance."

The shot told. A shiver passed through Alison from head to foot and a sort of sob escaped her lips. The Colonel saw his opportunity, and said, gently:

"I'm quite sure, Mrs. Jarvis, that you would never betray any confidence or any secret which

would harm Noel or injure his prospects or position."

She raised herself from the sitting position into which she had at once struggled on his entrance, but the pain in her ankle was too great for her to stand, and she sank back again on the little, hard cottage sofa.

"Of course I shouldn't," she said, in a low voice. "I should have thought it was hardly necessary to ask me."

The Colonel went on cautiously, watching her face, without appearing too eager:

"On the other hand, you might do Noel a good turn by telling his friends—telling me, for instance—who the mischief-makers are who are trying to bring ruin on his people."

Alison's handsome face changed a little; it was plain that she was in no humor to be expansive. However, he persisted:

"You would do them, Noel and his people, a service if you would let us know who it was that helped you out of the gallery that night."

"I am sorry I can't do that," said she, with decision.

"Why not?"

"I can't even answer that question. If I respect one person's confidence, I must respect another's."

Then the Colonel spoke in a very gentle, almost wheedling tone:

"Do you think you could tell me if I were to let you know, in return, something of vital im-

portance to you—something about your marriage, your *alleged* marriage?"

Alison was aggressive in a moment.

"I've no doubt you *could* tell me something about that," said she; "but I have only to wait to learn it from some one else. It was no marriage, of that I'm sure."

"Still, it counts as one until you know more. It is enough to prevent your marrying Noel. You'd like to marry Noel, just as he would like to marry you, and as no doubt he will marry you when things have straightened out a bit. In the meantime his family's interests are your interests—in prospective."

"I don't know about that," said she; "and if they were, I could do nothing. Do you suppose that what I know is known by no one else?"

At last she had flung down the gauntlet, and her challenge took the Colonel by surprise.

"Who knows it?" he asked loudly, and as he spoke he used a menacing gesture, perhaps without knowing what he did.

"I think, Colonel Cressingham," she said, "you ought to be clever enough to find that out for yourself. At any rate," she went on, her voice rising and her tone changing, "I'm not going to tell you—if you kill me—as you wanted to kill Noel!"

She hissed out the last words with such overwhelming passion, and met his eyes with such unflinching determination, that the Colonel, with a muttered word which she scarcely heard, but

the import of which she guessed, rose quickly from his chair and turned away.

He had scarcely done so when she took advantage of this movement to throw open the window and to call out, "Help! help!" with all the strength of her lungs.

The Colonel came back quickly to the couch, and asked, with savage emphasis:

"What the devil do you mean by that?"

But he did not dare to lay hands on her, and hearing at that moment a sound of heavy footsteps coming hurriedly toward the cottage, he, with another exclamation of the same kind as before, went quickly out of the room, and left the cottage by the front way, much to the surprise of the good woman, in apron and sunbonnet, who had gone out to meet a tiny child on its return from school.

The Colonel, however, was curious to see who it was that had come at Alison's call, and, retracing his steps through the trees, he saw Wilson, the second footman, standing by the window of the room where he had left the lame girl.

With a suspicious frown on his face, Colonel Cressingham, without addressing the man, went back to the house and to the presence of his host and Captain Lansdell.

But a visitor had arrived in his absence, and was now volubly narrating certain experiences, to which the other two gentlemen were listening with grave faces. It was Sydney Jarvis, and he was in a state of great agitation.



The entrance of the Colonel caused a diversion, and all faces were turned to him with anxiety.

"Well, did you find her?" asked Mr. Darke.

"Yes," said the Colonel, shortly; "I found the jade, but I couldn't make her speak. I've got her to say she'll hold her tongue, but, on the other hand, she says that there are others in the know!"

"Ah!" cried Sydney Jarvis, "so there are. There must be. Look at my experience!"

"What is that?" asked the Colonel, who had grown very pale under the tan caused by the sun.

"Why, I've been followed, I've been watched, and I believe that every sale I've negotiated for Mr. Darke has been noted. There!"

Sydney was evidently in a state bordering on panic, so that it was excusable to receive his statements with caution.

"How can you prove this?" asked Colonel Cressingham, while the Captain fidgeted up and down the room, and Mr. Darke sat back in his chair, with his black eyes somber with thought.

"I've been challenged. I don't know who he was, but I can guess that he was something to do with—with——"

"With what? Out with it!" said the Captain, gruffly.

"With Scotland Yard."

There was a dead silence. Then Mr. Darke burst into a hearty laugh.

"How beautifully they'll all be sold!" said he; "insurance people and police, too, if they've been silly enough to meddle with this! Why, man

alive, you know that for everything I've sold during the last five years I've bought at least twice as much!"

"Ye-es," said Sydney, faintly.

"Ye-es," mimicked Mr. Darke, contemptuously. "Why didn't you speak out like a man, you craven effigy, and say so?"

"Oh, I did, I did, I said lots of things," said Sydney, dismally. "But the deuce of it was that they knew such a lot more than I told them!"

"Explain yourself," said Mr. Darke, waving his hand with a bland air. "What did they know?"

"Well, they knew—at least they said, that when you sold a genuine Reynolds or Rubens you—you——"

"I did what?"

"You bought a copy!"

Mr. Darke drew himself up.

"But you knew better, and, of course, you told them so?"

"Oh, yes, I did. I told the fellow he was talking nonsense, and that he'd see."

"Well?"

"He said he *would* see."

"Where and when did this conversation take place?" asked the Colonel, breaking in upon the colloquy.

"This morning."

"Perhaps," suggested the Captain, suddenly, "you've been followed down here."

The Colonel walked, not quickly, but with de-

liberate steps, to the wide bay window, and looked out through the curtains. The window had been carefully closed before the conversation began. He opened it and looked out. It was the river side of the house, and through the trees the water could be seen flowing in the sunshine. There was a gentle breeze rustling the leaves and swaying the tall banks of flowers that were visible on each side. It was the prettiest, most charming picture of quiet riverside life, and there was not a cloud in the sky or an ugly shadow on the grass or on the ground.

The Colonel drew his head in again.

"I saw nobody," said he, "as I came from the gardener's lodge. The typewriter woman uttered a piercing yell when she wanted me to go, and one of the men-servants came running up to see what was the matter. Except him, and the gardener's wife, I saw no one in the grounds, and I came right through them and round the house."

The Captain stood with his hands in his pockets, whistling. Mr. Darke still leaned back in his chair, and still smiled, as he had done throughout Sydney's speech.

"But what does it matter if he has been followed?" asked he, imperturbably. "The more closely they investigate—and, for that matter, the insurance people have a right to investigate—the more thoroughly they will be convinced that things are all right."

Captain Lansdell looked at him and slowly

ruffled up his own scanty hair as he looked. But he said nothing; he even left off whistling.

"You've got plenty of cheek, Darke," said the Colonel, quietly, "but you'll find some of these people precious hard nuts to crack."

Then the Captain turned suddenly upon Sydney.

"What a confounded muff you are, Jerdan!" said he, roughly. "Whatever you take in hand you make a mess of! Look at the marriage with the typewriter woman! Why on earth didn't you go through with it and take her to Australia, as was arranged? Then we shouldn't have had her finger in the pie, and, by Jove, a woman's finger is always the devil's own!"

Sydney, who was very pale, began to look up out of the corners of his eyes in a way the Colonel was quick to note.

"Because I'm not such a rogue as I ought to be by this time, I suppose!" said the little man, doggedly. "Because, when I'd got on the brink of—of it, I found she was too good to be treated like that, and—and, well, there, I funk'd it, and I'm not ashamed of it!"

"Perhaps you're not ashamed, either, of having been caught over the sale of the things!" said the Captain, in the same harsh voice as before.

Then the little man turned upon him.

"How do you know," said he, "that you haven't been caught, too? You've had some pretty things to dispose of, and, for the matter of that, the

Colonel has, too. How do you know that you haven't been followed, both of you, as I was?"

The Colonel stroked his mustache and looked rather anxious, but Captain Lansdell flew into a passion and, losing control of himself, seized Sydney by the coat-collar and, with his eyes protruding and his cheeks growing purple, demanded that the "little sweep" should apologize, apologize this moment, for thinking that officers of his Majesty's army and navy would be guilty of making such asses of themselves as he had done.

The Captain was so terribly in earnest, and Sydney was so small and slight compared to his antagonist, that both the Colonel and Mr. Darke had to interfere to put a stop to the unequal encounter.

This Mr. Darke could only do by word of mouth and by the influence of his eye; but the Colonel did more, for he not only remonstrated with the choleric Captain, but did his best to draw him off.

The tussle had gone on for some moments, when an exclamation from Sydney, who had suddenly been seized with fright which made him almost rigid, caused them all to turn and look in the direction in which he was looking.

And there, standing like a statue, in his usual attitude of respect and blank indifference, at the end of the room, was the second footman, waiting until he could find an opportunity of making an announcement to his master.

The first question that filled the minds of all

the four gentlemen was how he had got into the room; for the door was locked, and, though the window was open, it is no easy matter to enter a room by that means without attracting the attention of one of the quartette of occupants.

But there he was, calm, apparently abstracted, watching the progress of the struggle with eyes that did not seem to see.

It was the Colonel's turn to lose patience. Regardless of the fact that the man was not his servant, he strode up the room to him and, dragging him to the window, threw him out of it with a skilful and muscular hand.

The man, however, was not to be put out by such a trifle as this. He lay perfectly still on the soft grass under the window, which was only some two feet from the ground, and, still holding his little salver, from which, however, the card had been sent flying, he looked up into the Colonel's face and said, calmly:

"A gentleman to see Mr. Darke, sir!"

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## CHAPTER XXIII.

THE Colonel looked down at the footman from the open window at which he was standing. Mr. Darke called out to him, and the Captain asked him, in his ear, whether he was mad, but without effect.

He pushed the Captain away with an impatient jerk of the elbow, and made no reply at all to Mr. Darke, whose voice grew louder and more imperious as he called to his angry guest.

Sydney Jarvis meanwhile was getting closer and closer to the door, at the keyhole of which he began to listen and to peep with great intentness.

"What on earth are you doing at that door, Jerdan?" asked Mr. Darke, suddenly perceiving this singular action on the part of the little agent.

Sydney drew himself up and came to his employer's side.

"I hear voices outside. I don't know who it is," he began, with such an unaffectedly dismal air that Mr. Darke laughed outright.

"Why shouldn't there be voices outside? And what does it matter to you if there are?" said he. "There are voices inside, too, aren't there?"

"The footman said that some one wanted to see you," stammered Sydney. "Hadn't we better be thinking of—of——"

"Of what?" said Mr. Darke, blandly.

But for answer Sydney ran across the room to the window.

There, however, the footman was standing on the grass outside, rubbing the evidences of his fall from his livery. The Colonel frowned at Sydney, who had his hands on the sill, as if he would have jumped out.

"What are you doing?" said the Colonel, shortly, with a frown.

But the sight of the footman, with his impassive face and silver salver, was enough to send Sydney back into the room again.

Colonel Cressingham turned his head and looked at Mr. Darke, who had in his hand the card which the servant had brought in. Nobody had seen this card delivered, yet there it was in his hands.

"I'm going to give this fellow of yours a talking to, if you don't mind, Darke," said the Colonel, who had recovered his usual coolness.

Mr. Darke looked up with an inquiring glance.

"A talking to? What about?" said he, with apparent indifference.

"About his confounded impertinence," replied the Colonel, briefly, and, without further explanation, he put his leg over the window-sill and confronted the imperturbable Wilson on the lawn outside.

Looking him straight in the face, he asked, abruptly:

"Who the devil are you?"

"My name's Wilson, sir. I——"

"Wilson be d——! *You* know what I mean. I caught you loafing about outside the gardener's cottage this morning, where the typewriter girl is. Now, I'll hazard the guess that it was you who got her out of the gallery on the night of the fire."

"Yes, sir," said the footman, quietly, as if it



had been an every-day occurrence and part of his ordinary duties.

"And that it was you who gave information to the insurance offices, false information, as will be proved."

"I've given no false information, sir, to anybody."

"True or false, you've given it."

The man looked him straight in the eyes.

"What makes you think so, sir?" said he.

"Your conduct. You're no servant, though you have acted the part very well, since I never suspected you till to-day. Now, as you're found out, you may as well confess who set you on this work."

The man did not hesitate a moment.

"Well, sir, as you say, I may as well tell you now," he admitted. "My name's Penry, and I'm employed by a private inquiry office, and I've been sent down here at the instance of a gentleman whose name I dare say you'll remember, one Major Brownlow."

Colonel Cressingham, who was as cool as a cucumber, either did not or would not remember the name. He shook his head.

"I may have met such a person," he said, "but I certainly don't remember him."

"Perhaps you remember his son, sir, Mr. Cecil Brownlow, from whom you won seven thousand pounds at baccarat at Newmarket, and whom you threw out of the room when he accused you of cheating?"

The Colonel drew himself up.

"Confound you! How dare you——" he began.

But Paul Penry cut him short.

"The young man fell against an iron balustrade, and was never quite right in the head afterward. They couldn't bring it home to you and you got off scot-free. But the old Major never forgave you for ruining his son, and you found it prudent to leave the country for a time. I believe you went to America, sir, and that you returned to this country for a reason of the same sort that sent you away from it."

"You shall pay for these infamous slanders, by Jove!" said the Colonel, who looked very handsome, very dignified, as he stood erect before the detective and swelled with indignation at his off-hand accusations.

"Yes, sir," said Penry, quietly.

There was a pause, and then the Colonel said, contemptuously:

"And do you think you can rake up these silly stories now and make a case of them against me?"

"Oh, no, sir, we've got plenty more to make a case of now," replied Penry, in the same imperturbable tone.

The Colonel looked down at him haughtily.

"And what fool's errand has brought you here?" he asked.

"Well, sir, I heard, quite by chance, in a Manchester boarding-house, where I was on business connected with some racing sharpers, where you

were. And in the way of business I let Major Brownlow know. I thought he might take an interest in you. I was right. He did."

"Confound your impertinence!"

"Yes, sir. On hearing that you were on intimate terms at the house of a rich man with young sons, Major Brownlow felt curious as to what you were doing there. And I, therefore, by his direction, took service in the household of your friend in order to learn what you—if I may put it so—were up to. Incidentally, I may say, I've learned a good deal more than I expected to."

The Colonel had insensibly changed his tone. Instead of being haughty and contemptuous, he was thoughtful and grave.

"You've made a great mistake," said he. "I own to have chosen my friends badly some years ago, and I got mixed up with some racing and card-playing people whom I should have done better to avoid. But that is over and done with long ago, and for years now I haven't touched a card or associated with any but people of the strictest honor. That you will find. Why, man, if I'd been ashamed of my actions, do you think I should still be known by my own name?"

Penry shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"Well, sir, it's always safest not to change one's name, if it can be avoided, as I daresay you know. You must know most things, sir, that are worth knowing."

The compliment, if it was a compliment, had no effect upon the Colonel. He pulled his mus-

tache thoughtfully, and his blue eyes roved round the grounds with a searching look as he listened. At last his gaze was arrested by something he descried—a movement of the leaves which was not the result of the breeze, perhaps—in a clump of trees and shrubs on his left hand; his expression did not change, and his hand still stroked his golden mustache. But his color went, and left his face a sort of brownish-gray. Then, without another word to the footman, he re-entered the study by the window.

Sydney and Captain Lansdell were together at one end of the room, conversing earnestly in an undertone. Mr. Darke was leaning back in his wheel-chair, tenderly nursing his gouty hand, and looking thoughtfully out of the window.

“Hallo!” said he, as the Colonel re-entered.

The Colonel said nothing till he got close to him, when he whispered in his ear:

“That fellow Wilson, the second footman, is from a private inquiry office.”

Perhaps Mr. Darke was not surprised to hear this, after Wilson’s somewhat eccentric behavior of a few minutes previously. At any rate, all he said was:

“No! Is he, really?”

And he smiled quite pleasantly, as if it were a good joke.

At that moment there was an attempt made to open the door from the outside, and Mrs. Darke’s voice cried, irritably:

“Open the door, Jo; I want to come in!”

Sydney, who was nearest to that end of the room, looked at Mr. Darke apprehensively and inquiringly.

"Yes, yes, open it, certainly," said the latter.

The next moment Mrs. Darke, radiantly handsome in a morning dress of white muslin, with her great pearls round her neck and diamonds sparkling on her white, plump fingers, burst into the room and almost ran, flushed and agitated, to her husband's side.

"Oh, Jo," she whispered, with a frightened glance round the room, which took in the Colonel, who was still near the window, and the two others, who were by the door, "this man—I'm sure he's not a gentleman, who wants to see you—I believe he's a detective, and that he's come about the Colonel. You know what Swithin was always saying about him, only you wouldn't believe him. Well, I think there must be something in it, after all."

"Hush!" said Mr. Darke, sternly. And he whispered back: "My dear, you ought to know better than to say anything to me against my friends."

"But if it should turn out that it's true?" pouted the poor lady, earnestly, while the three gentlemen affected to converse, but perhaps kept their ears open all the time.

"Well, well, then, we shall have to put up with the consequences of having misjudged our friends," said Mr. Darke.

She looked earnestly into his face. He did not

usually take interference on her part so amiably.

Accustomed as she was to trust her husband implicitly, and for the most part to obey him without question, she felt that there was something strange, almost alarming, about the gentleness, the patience, with which he listened to words which she had expected him to treat as utterly idle or to rebuke sharply as improper.

She drew back a step and frowned in perplexity.

"Is it—is it—all right?" she said, faintly.

"My dear," he began, with smiling impatience, putting his left hand affectionately upon her arm, "it is quite right. Surely you can trust me to know!"

But there was in his eyes, as he looked up into her face with the affection which never failed her, something which, instead of reassuring her, filled her with fresh alarm.

Before she could speak again there was a knock at the study door, and Carrie, without waiting for permission, came in with a frightened face.

"Mother, papa, there are some men——" she began.

And then, seeing that the room contained so many people, she stopped short, and blushed and stammered and bit her lip.

"My dear, what on earth is the matter with you?" said Mr. Darke, quite gently, and with perfect calmness, but also with dignified surprise.

"Oh, papa, it's only—there are some men in

the grounds—I—I didn't know who they were." said the stammering girl, who had evidently, to judge by the looks she cast in the direction of the Colonel, become infected by her mother's fears.

"You needn't trouble your head about them, or about anybody," said Mr. Darke. "Now, run away, there's a good girl; and, Marion"—he turned to his wife, and again he laid his left hand caressingly on her arm—"you go, too. And don't worry yourself, my dear girl, don't worry. It will be all right, all right."

Never had she remembered him addressing her in so affectionate a tone when she had attempted to remonstrate with him or to thwart him in any way. The pink color faded from her face, her good-humored mouth fell into lines of distress and dismay.

Still, though she delayed, he did not lose his temper with her, but gently urged her to leave him.

"And send the gentleman, man, or whoever he is, in to me—at once, my dear, at once."

The tears were in her eyes, but she dared not delay any longer. Withdrawing slowly and taking Carrie by the arm as she went, she left the room, with one last apprehensive glance, first at her husband and then at the Colonel.

A few moments later a tall, brisk-looking man of military appearance was ushered into the study, where Mr. Darke still sat back in his wheel-chair, having taken himself nearer to the window, where the bright light fell full on his

pale face, with its glowing black eyes and frame of silver hair.

Colonel Cressingham sat at a little distance, by a desk, busy with some papers. Captain Lansdell and Sydney Jarvis stood not far from the door, and neither they nor any one else in the room felt much surprise when the newcomer, seeing the key in the lock, promptly turned it and transferred it to his pocket.

"May I ask the meaning of this?" asked Mr. Darke, blandly, from the window.

"My business is of a very private nature," explained the visitor, "and as I believe, gentlemen, that you are all more or less concerned in it, it's better that we should be undisturbed."

"Certainly, if you wish it," said Mr. Darke. "And may we know what the business is that demands such extraordinary precautions?"

"I hold warrants for the arrest of three of you, I believe, sir."

"Arrest!" echoed Mr. Darke, still with the same coolness with which he had treated his wife's fears and the Colonel's announcement that one of his own servants was a detective. "What for?"

"Conspiring to defraud, sir."

Mr. Darke's face suddenly woke into intelligence.

"Oh, it's this ridiculous insurance business, I suppose," he said. "And which three out of the four of us do you want?"

The officer looked round the room.



"Captain Lansdell, I believe?" said he, bowing to the gentleman indicated.

"Great heavens, man, you don't suppose I have anything to do with this affair—I, a late officer in his Majesty's navy?" cried the Captain, indignantly.

"And Colonel Cressingham. I believe you, sir, are he?" And he looked at the Colonel, who bowed mockingly in return.

"Ah, I thought you wouldn't leave me out. Give a dog a bad name and hang him!" said he, coolly and almost flippantly.

Mr. Darke, still cool and calm, leaned back in his chair, smiling.

"And poor little Jerdan, are you going to take him, too?" said he, raising his eyebrows.

The officer shook his head and came nearer to the master of the house.

"No, sir," said he, "I don't want him."

The Colonel broke out with an oath.

"Why, that's the very man you do want, if you want anybody," said he. "Stanley Jerdan, *alias* Sydney Jarvis. The little beggar's the only man here that uses an *alias*."

"That may be, sir, but I've no warrant for him, for all that."

Mr. Darke looked at the officer with keen black eyes.

"Who's the third man you want, then?" asked he, blandly.

"Well, sir, I think you can guess," said the officer.

Mr. Darke's expression changed. Leaning forward a little, and resting his sound hand upon a little table near him, he stared into the man's face, and said, in a voice of sonorous amazement:

"You don't mean to say you're going to have the audacity to accuse me, a wretched invalid, of a share in your trumped-up conspiracy?"

The officer hesitated.

"Well, sir, there are other charges against you—more serious ones," said he.

Mr. Darke fell back in his chair.

"This is too much—too much," he said.

His head sank on his breast, and he began to breathe heavily, like a man in a fit.

Instinctively the officer approached to help him; but hardly had he come within reach when, with a lightning-like movement, Mr. Darke sprang out of his chair and butted the officer in the chest, throwing him backward against a table, which gave way and let him down to the floor.

There was a sort of savage cry from the others, and the Captain ran to the window.

But before he could reach it the long, gaunt form of Mr. Darke, uncanny in the rapidity of its movements, had disappeared over the window-ledge and out of sight of the group in the room.

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## CHAPTER XXIV.

ALTHOUGH there was not a single person in the room unprepared for the discovery that Mr. Darke's character of invalid was an assumed one,

the sight of the bent, spare frame, which they had been used to seeing surrounded with all the appliances of the cripple, acted upon them like a stroke of paralysis; so that for a few moments even the Captain—the most alert of them all—could only stand helplessly at the window, gazing at his active and ingenious accomplice in crime as he sped like an arrow over the lawn and, plunging into the trees and bushes near the river, disappeared from sight.

Then the Colonel laughed drily.

“Confound him! ‘Jilting Jo’ to the last!” said he. And turning to the detective, who was by this time on his feet again, he said: “He’s got away.”

But the officer merely shook his head, and said:

“No. There are too many of us for that. And we knew too well whom we had to deal with. He’ll not get far.”

Even as he spoke there appeared suddenly on the lawn, emerging from various unseen hiding-places, three or four plain-clothes policemen, who closed in on the clump of trees with rapid and soldierly movements, some within sight of the window and some beyond.

In the meantime Penry, no longer anxious about concealing his business, stood close under the window, ready to give any help, if need be, to the men from Scotland Yard.

“Look here,” said the Colonel, quite coolly, to the officer who had the warrants, “I don’t want to get away. I have a complete answer to this

charge, and I'm as anxious as you are to have everything cleared up. But I want to see the end of this. I want to get out and see what happens."

"And I, too," said the Captain.

The officer knew that there was little fear of his losing his prisoners, as he had taken the precaution to have the grounds occupied by men who had arrived, some by the road and some by the river, and taken up their positions, one by one, so cautiously as to be unobserved by the household at Riverscourt.

But they had not far to go. When they had passed the clump of trees they came in sight of a group of men surrounding one of the pretty private boat-houses with a little tea-pavilion on the top, of which the banks of the river offer so many picturesque examples.

A fanciful staircase led from the ground to the rustic balcony and to the pleasant room, overlooking the river, where the Darkes generally had tea on summer afternoons.

At the bottom of this staircase stood two men, while others watched the banks and the water.

One of the men nodded toward the pavilion as the chief detective came up.

"He's in there, right enough," said he. "He can't get away."

"Right," said the other, and immediately he proceeded to mount the steps, not without caution, as he was aware that he had a desperate character to deal with.

But the next minute he was knocking at the

door, which was locked, and then, not getting any answer, he made an attempt to force it open. Then they all heard a perfectly cheerful voice cry out:

"Wait a minute. I'll let you in."

It was the voice of Josiah Darke, just as resonant, just as clear as ever.

They all waited in considerable anxiety for what was to happen, and there were whispers of "Firearms" passed from lip to lip.

The Colonel and Captain Lansdell exchanged significant looks, but no word.

After a few minutes' interval, during which the detective had shaken the door and knocked at it two or three times, it was unlocked and thrown open by Mr. Darke himself, erect, dignified, bland as ever.

He had coolly and cynically thrown off every pretense of physical infirmity, and beyond the fact that he was of a ghastly pallor—a not unusual circumstance with him—he seemed to give little sign of concern. The police officers glanced at his hands. One of them, the right, which he had been wearing bound up of late, bore the mark of a deep, recent scratch, but he held no weapon in either, and he stood in the doorway nodding and smiling to his confederates below with a stoicism which earned him the hearty admiration of the men sent to take him.

"Jilting Jo" was "game."

When he had smiled affably on the assembled group for a few minutes, he quietly turned to the

detective and invited him into the pavilion, where they sat down and entered into earnest conversation in full view of the people below.

"What's the game?" asked one of the officers of another.

The Colonel caught the words, and repeated them, with a muttered oath, to Captain Lansdell, who replied in the same tone. Then both watched more keenly than ever. They had both noted that the little bamboo writing-desk, at which Mr. Darke sometimes wrote letters in the afternoon, was open, and that, indeed, the detective's arm was resting upon the flap.

It was half an hour, at least, since the sensational flight of the master of Riverscourt, and the assembled group were showing signs of impatience, when suddenly they saw the head detective rise quickly from his chair.

"A doctor! Send for a doctor," said he.

There was no eagerness to obey this command, for, indeed, all present, except, perhaps, Jo Darke's confederates, looked upon the fainting attitude and convulsive writhing of the accused man as another ruse to gain sympathy or to gain time.

But the Colonel knew better.

"He's done it!" said he, as he got on the second step of the staircase and looked up. "He's done it! I knew he would!"

Paul Penry was near enough to hear the words, and he asked:

"What, sir? What is it?"

"He's taken poison," said the Colonel, laconically.

"Poison?"

"Yes. Cyanide of potassium, I should think. I saw him note the name—saw it in his face—when a recent tragic affair was reported in the papers."

The Colonel was right. Long before a doctor could be at his side Mr. Darke was dead on the pavilion floor, and his wife, in wild grief and despair, was hanging over the body, calling to him and upbraiding all around with causing his death.

"If you wanted to arrest Colonel Cressingham," she sobbed, hysterically, "you should have done it quietly, without letting my husband know. As it is, you've killed him; the shock of this, acting upon his weak heart, has killed him. The best, the best of men! My darling, my darling Jo!"

And she sobbed and rocked herself in overwhelming grief that brought a lump into the throats of most of the bystanders, whose presence she neither knew nor heeded.

"Is it genuine? Did she know nothing, do you think?" one of the police officers asked Paul Penry, who was standing discreetly in the background.

He nodded.

"It's genuine enough as far as sorrow goes," said he. "They were fond of each other, I'm certain. You can never tell how much or how little

a woman knows. Sometimes they don't *choose* to understand half they hear."

When Alison, having learned the startling news from the gardener's wife, arrived at the house, she did not dare to approach Mrs. Darke, who was scarcely conscious when her first paroxysms of grief were over, but contented herself with trying to comfort poor Carrie, who was almost stunned by the occurrences of the morning.

Some inkling of the nature of the charges against her dead father must have reached the poor child's ears, for she kept repeating, in a monotonous voice:

"I don't believe it of papa. I won't hear anything against poor papa!"

The news had filtered through to Lord Geldestone's place, but no message arrived from the household, and later in the day it was known that the Earl and his daughter had taken a hurried departure for London, to be out of the way of further developments of the scandal.

The Colonel and Captain Lansdell had already been escorted back to town when Alison met Sydney Jarvis, who was lingering about the place, and who turned scarlet with surprise and confusion on finding himself face to face with her.

"Now," said she, "you can't get away. The least you can do is to explain everything to me."

"Well, you see," said he, finding himself cornered and at her mercy, "I really did think, you know, that my wife was dead."



"Oh, and she isn't, I suppose!" said Alison, with suddenly opened eyes.

"No. We'd been separated for years, and, indeed, I thought I was free——"

"Of course," said Alison, drily. "And what made you so anxious to marry me, when you didn't care two straws about me?"

"It was business," replied Sydney, simply. "I had done a good deal of work for Mr. Darke—indeed, that was all I did, buying and selling for him and running his errands."

"A very honorable business!" interpolated Alison, drily.

"Well, well, I didn't know what it was going to lead to, I didn't, indeed. Anyhow, when Darke was so anxious to get you married and out of the way, because of young Noel's infatuation, it was arranged that I should find you out and—see what I could do. You see, I'm quite honest."

"Yes, because now you can't help yourself," said she, quietly.

"Well, you might give me credit for something. I've done you no harm," said Sydney, irritably. "Noel had to marry Lord Geldestone's daughter, because if anything were to go wrong with Darke's plans later——"

"You mean his plans for defrauding the insurance office," put in Alison.

"Oh, I don't know what his plans were, I'm sure," said Sydney. "But, anyhow, if anything had gone wrong after Noel's marriage with Lady Rosina, it would have been hushed up. You

know how difficult it is to get a prosecution started when there are great names involved."

"I see I was to be sacrificed, and Noel, too, just to protect a gang of rogues."

"Well, I wasn't a rogue, at least, I wasn't *such* a rogue," said Sydney. "I meant to take you to Australia—believing I was free to marry, you understand—and I should have made a very good husband. Only at the last moment I thought, I felt, well—that you were a bit too good to be treated like that—and I—I funked it, and I—I bolted."

He was so white, and trembled so much, that Alison felt sorry for him, in spite of everything.

"I wonder," she said, gently, "that such a good-natured man as you are should ever have let himself be used as a tool by men like these!"

"I got in for it gradually," explained Sydney. "It was the Colonel who began it, you know. He's the leading spirit, the clever head, and Darke had the nerve and the steadfastness to carry out the other's plans. The Captain was a sort of make-weight, not so important as the others, but useful because he had no conscience, and such a manner that everybody thought him a good fellow."

"And how long have they worked together?"

"Well, the police say they've just got evidence that they've worked together for at least twelve years, during which they've successfully carried through a lot of swindles of different kinds, Darke passing as a millionaire, when, as a matter

of fact, he lived for the most part 'on the bounce,' as they say—on the reputation of riches rather than on the money."

"And didn't he ever have a valuable collection?"

"A very valuable one at one time. The collecting and insurance were to be a grand *coup*."

Alison uttered a sudden cry.

"And who was it that tried to get in that night?" she asked, quickly.

"Old Darke. Thought it wiser to do it from the outside, so that they couldn't say it was done from within. And there were the Colonel and the Captain, sitting in the dining-room, to swear he hadn't left their presence!"

"And you knew about it? And knew that it was he—for it must have been he—who murdered the girl and shot at me? And who must have been seen by his own son?" cried she, all in a breath.

"No, no, I didn't know it, I swear I didn't. But I've no reason now to doubt that it was he."

"No, nor I. I knew it was he who locked me in the gallery, for I heard Noel, when he was unconscious, raving about his father's pretended lameness. It will kill him, I know it will!"

"Oh, no, no, you mustn't allow that. It lies with you, I expect. And you know you have only to bring a case against me—I shall be all right, for I can swear I didn't know my wife was alive—to get free and marry him. What's become of him?"

"He's down at Brighton. Paul Penry sent him there to his brother Swithin, whom the family sent away, because, I suppose, he guessed too much."

Sydney nodded.

"Yes. It was what he knew sent Swithin on the wrong road, I believe," said he.

Alison drew a long, sobbing breath.

"I wonder," she said, "that you, after all, could turn round upon your own confederates and betray them to the police!"

Sydney shook his head dismally.

"I never was their confederate. I never even knew Darke was shamming lameness. I swear it!" said he. "Of course, I don't mean to say I thought he was as blameless as a babe, or that any of them were. But I didn't know what I do now. And as for 'giving them away,' I didn't. I was watched, followed, collared, and I had to confess. That was all. And as my confession helped them, they thought the little fish might as well be allowed to get through the net, that it might be drawn tighter round the big ones!"

She drew back a step, shuddering and sick. The whole story was such a pitiful laying bare of sordid schemes and guilty deeds that the thought that Noel should be connected with these shady scoundrels, should suffer for their sins, was terrible to bear.

She let Sydney call a hîy for her, and then, dragging her sprained ankle after her as best she could, she drove to the station, leaving Rivers-

court behind her with a shiver of relief. On arriving at Paddington she drove straight to Victoria, where she booked at once for Brighton, and that very evening she found herself at the lodgings where Noel and his half-brother Swithin were staying.

She had scarcely reached the door of the house, limping as she walked, when Swithin himself threw it open and came down to help her in. She recognized in a moment the fact that a great change for the better had taken place in him, and when he greeted her with delight, and told her, as he helped her indoors, that she would save Noel's life, he knew she would, she could scarcely repress her tears.

The next moment she was in the sitting-room and in the presence not of Noel, but of his ghost, a pale, worn, worried, prematurely aged man, in whom she scarcely recognized the bright, handsome Noel she had known.

"I'm ashamed to look you in the face," said he, in a low voice. "I wanted—we wanted, Swithin and I—to go away, slink away, to Australia, Van Diemen's Land, anywhere, under a different name, and be forgotten by you all."

"You couldn't expect to be forgotten by me," sobbed Alison, through her tears. "Oh, Noel, I have so longed to see you again, to tell you how I feel!"

Then Swithin, luckily for their composure, broke in with boisterous exclamations of anger and dismay. He had found out something long

ago, and had been treated with savage repression in consequence. Already the influence of his younger brother, who now knew as much as he did, was having a good effect upon him; and the half-brothers, drawn together by a common sorrow, a common shame, had resolved to start life anew together.

A few months later, but not before the trial of what came to be called the Riverscourt gang had resulted in penal servitude for the Colonel and the Captain, Alison and her husband Noel started to begin a new life in Canada. Swithin went with them across the Atlantic, bound for Florida.

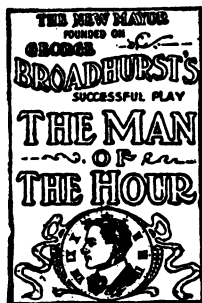
Mrs. Darke had found friends to sympathize with her woeful plight, and she, with her two children, remained in England. But the house at Riverscourt was shut up and remained in that desolate condition until it went the way of all desolate mansions, and was opened afresh by a "philanthropist," who saw his way to making a living out of the management of a charitable institution.

But the servants do not like to be left alone in the dark in the house even now, for they tell tales in the neighborhood about a long, lean figure that haunts the place at night, holding a light in a scarred right hand.

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